

Adachi^{and} Shimamura

3
NOVEL



WRITTEN BY
Hitoma Iruma

ILLUSTRATED BY
Non

Table of Contents

Color Inserts

Table of Contents Page

Title Page

Copyrights and Credits

Chapter 1: Choose My Chocolate

Interlude: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop, Part 4

Chapter 2: Heliotrope (Seeking the Sun's Sparkle)

Interlude: Yashiro Comes Calling, Part 4

Chapter 3: Old Rose (Thorns of the Past)

Interlude: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop, Part 5

Chapter 4: Marigold (A Saint's Loving Embrace)

Interlude: Yashiro Comes Calling, Part 5

Chapter 5: Sakura (Make a Wish)

Afterword

Newsletter



Adachi^{and} Shimamura

STORY BY Hitoma Iruma ART BY Non

NOVEL

3



Choose my Chocolate

"Do you have any...plans...for the fourteenth?"

"Well, uh...do you want me to get you chocolate, or do you want to get me chocolate?"

Adachi

She has a slim, stick figure body type with few curves to speak of. Lately, she's struggled with her feelings for Shimamura.

Shimamura

A girl with bleached hair and a bit of a ditzzy side, she wears more makeup than Adachi does, but sees Adachi as the more beautiful of the two.



"That's close
enough, right?"

Heliotrope
Seeking the
Sun's Sparkle

Old Rose
Thorns of
the Past



"Pssh! I'm not a
little baby!"

"Do you want to hold
hands too?"



Marigold
A Saint's Loving
Embrace

"But, like, what does that mean...?"

"Huh? It means what it sounds like! Keep rockin'! You need me to demonstrate...!"

"I mean, like, what's the general idea behind it? 'Let's stay friends' or...?"

"Whoood! How's that?"

Table of Contents

1. Choose My Chocolate

INTERLUDE: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop, Part 4

2. Heliotrope (Seeking the Sun's Sparkle)

INTERLUDE: Yashiro Comes Calling, Part 4

3. Old Rose (Thorns of the Past)

INTERLUDE: A Visit to the Butcher's Shop, Part 5

4. Marigold (A Saint's Loving Embrace)

INTERLUDE: Yashiro Comes Calling, Part 5

5. Sakura (Make a Wish)

Afterword



Adachi^{and} Shimamura

NOVEL

3

STORY BY

**Hitoma
Iruma**

ILLUSTRATED BY

Non



Seven Seas Entertainment

ADACHI TO SHIMAMURA VOL. 3

© Hitoma Iruma 2014
Edited by Dengeki Bunko
Illustrations by Non

First published in Japan in 2014 by
KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with
KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.

No portion of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form without written permission from the copyright
holders. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places,
and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or
are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales,
or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Seven Seas press and purchase enquiries can be sent to
Marketing Manager Lianne Sentar at press@gomanga.com.
Information regarding the distribution and purchase of
digital editions is available from Digital Manager CK Russell
at digital@gomanga.com.

Seven Seas and the Seven Seas logo are trademarks of
Seven Seas Entertainment. All rights reserved.

Follow Seven Seas Entertainment online at
sevenseasentertainment.com.

TRANSLATION: Molly Lee
COVER DESIGN: Nicky Lim
LOGO DESIGN: George Panella
INTERIOR LAYOUT & DESIGN: Clay Gardner
PROOFREADER: Kat Adler, Stephanie Cohen
LIGHT NOVEL EDITOR: Nibedita Sen
PREPRESS TECHNICIAN: Rhiannon Rasmussen-Silverstein
PRODUCTION MANAGER: Lissa Pattillo
MANAGING EDITOR: Julie Davis
ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER: Adam Arnold
PUBLISHER: Jason DeAngelis

ISBN: 978-1-64505-771-0
Printed in Canada
First Printing: November 2020
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Chapter 1: Choose My Chocolate

TO ME, it was still winter, regardless of what anyone else had to say. The signs were everywhere—in the air, in the clouds. I could tell by the way my nose was so quick to get cold, and the way my eyelids started to droop in class... Okay, maybe that last one was less of a seasonal event and more of a year-round staple. Even so, there was something about winter that made me prone to habitually dozing off, regardless of how much sleep I got the night before. Maybe my body just wanted to hibernate. *Would if I could.*

It was February 4—just another ordinary afternoon. Classes were finally over, and the mood in the room was light and cheerful. The instant the bell rang, a handful of people jumped to their feet and dashed off to their club activities or whatever. As I watched them go, I thought, *Ah, the quintessential high-school experience*. At the same time, however, I didn't enjoy the rush of cold air that replaced the students as they ran into the hall. *Brrr*. I could never imagine myself eagerly skipping out into *that*.

Now that winter vacation was over, our seating arrangement changed, just as it had six months prior at the end of summer break. As a result, I was shuffled from the center of the room to the back, near the door. Personally, I was happy to have some added distance between me and the podium; maybe now the teachers wouldn't glare at me every time I yawned. Unfortunately, this freedom came at a price: an icy gust every time the door opened. That kept me on my toes a bit more than I would've liked.

"Now then..."

What were my after-school plans? Go straight home? Or find out if Adachi needed to talk to me about something?

Here we were at the start of a new month, and Adachi was still acting weird. Then again, I only remembered her acting normal for approximately the first month or so after I met her. So, for all I knew, maybe this weirdness *was* her acting normal. Or maybe she'd chill out again once summer rolled around. *Oh, Adachi, what am I*

going to do with you?

She looked over her shoulder, and our eyes met. She froze; I stared back like a deer in headlights, my textbook hovering awkwardly over my open bookbag. We were a bit too far apart to hold a conversation, but this staring contest wasn't exactly a great alternative. Then, before I could recover, Adachi averted her gaze and started fidgeting with her bangs, so I went back to packing my bag.

These days, I found that it was actually really difficult to get a solid grasp of my friendship with her.

She often shot me these furtive glances during lunch or after school. Never during class, though, since everyone would've seen her doing it. Instead, she'd seemingly have the world's quietest fit. One minute she'd blush like crazy out of the blue, and the next, she'd bury her face in her textbook, or restlessly pat her hair down. Absolutely zero chill. Naturally, this all took place right within my line of sight, because her desk had been shuffled into the center of the room where mine used to be. Since she kept wiggling from side to side, I could only imagine the struggle the girl who sat behind her went through just to copy down notes from the blackboard.

"G'day, *Shee-ma* ! It's me, *Hee-no* !" called a sunny voice with sunny skin to match—which is to say, majorly sunburnt.

Sure enough, it was definitely Hino, except she sounded as if she was trying (and failing) to do some kind of foreign accent. Come to think of it, I seemed to recall that she'd gone abroad with her family for New Year's. While the rest of us shivered in the winter cold, she looked like she'd stepped right off the beach.

"Was that supposed to be Australian?" I asked.

Maybe Hino had come back to Japan with more than just a deep tan.

"You ever notice how you can make your name sound more like a brand name if you pronounce it like an English speaker?" asked Hino. "We were just talking about it."

Beside her, Nagafuji nodded sagely. Idly, I wondered how on earth the two of them ever managed to arrive at that conclusion.

"Oh, but then again, 'Shimamura' is already a brand name,

huh? Written the same way and everything.”

“No it isn’t, actually!”

Nagafuji kept nodding, but I had no idea who she was agreeing with.

“Anyways, I just wanted to say hi. See ya!”

With a wave, Hino left the classroom, her tanned arms contrasting sharply with this snowy-white Japanese winter. Nagafuji started after her, then stopped short and turned back as though she’d just thought of something. Unlike her other half, she was ghostly pale.

“Thrown it around lately?” she asked, sliding her glasses up her nose.

“What?”

She swung her arm downward in a throwing motion, though I found myself more distracted by the jiggle of her chest. *What on earth is she...? Ohhhh, the boomerang. Right.*

“Oh, yeah, totally,” I said. “My sister, uh...she loves it.”

Or so she claimed, anyway. Never mind the fact that I could feel said “sister” staring at me right this very moment.

“Tell her we can have a throwing competition once she practices enough.”

“Oh, uh...sure,” I said.

With that, Nagafuji headed off after Hino, leaving me with a promise I couldn’t quite keep. I *really* couldn’t imagine Adachi signing up for any sort of “throwing competition,” so if Nagafuji was looking for a boomerang buddy, she was better off asking Hino.

That said, I sensed that Hino probably wouldn’t oblige, in the same way that Nagafuji never went fishing. But they were still good friends, even if they didn’t share 100 percent of their lives. I liked that about them. It was healthy to have a little distance.

“Australia, huh...?”

Admittedly, I was a bit jealous. Not only had I never set foot outside Japan, I’d never even been on an airplane. I’d at least ridden a bullet train, obviously, but that was different to me. I’m not sure why.

Once the classroom door shut and I no longer felt the frigid hallway air blowing in, I decided it was about time I headed home myself. Right as I started to rise from my seat, however, I noticed someone hovering near my desk. Frozen in place with my knees half-bent, I looked up to find Adachi standing there.

“Sup?” I asked awkwardly.

“Uh...hey yo,” she replied, equally awkward.

Since I’d eaten lunch with Hino and Nagafuji, this was my first time hearing Adachi’s voice today. Mind you, I’d tried to invite her to join us, but she ran off. Evidently, she wasn’t comfortable around them.

Not that I couldn’t understand that, of course. Just because they were my friends didn’t automatically make them hers, too.

“Are you...free today?” she asked me hesitantly.

“Hmm?”

“Would you wanna maybe go on a trip—no, I mean, like, an outing or whatever?”

Why did she always have to cushion her words with “maybe” or “whatever”? And why did she sound so panicked?

“So, basically, you want to hang out somewhere?”

Adachi nodded slightly, and for a moment I considered saying, “No thanks, it’s too cold.” Then it occurred to me that I might come off as rude, so I thought better of it. For me, the most exhausting part of any relationship was having to choose my words. I was nowhere near eloquent enough to rephrase my sentences on the fly, so it took me a while. *If only I could just choose a dialogue option from a predetermined list like in a video game.*

“Oh, but if you’re busy, it’s cool. It totally doesn’t matter or whatever,” Adachi added, waving her hands as though putting up a preemptive barrier. This defensive gesture was a telltale sign of someone who lacked confidence in how the other person would respond. That fear of rejection would inevitably push the first person to assume the worst and jump the gun. *Relatable* .

In my case, however, Adachi’s gesture just made me want to mess with her.

“Oh, yes. *Super* busy. I’m so glad you understand,” I joked affably.

Unfortunately, this joke didn’t land. At all. Not only did she not laugh, she completely wilted. One more push, and I felt like she might just burst into tears. Panicking internally, I hastily changed tack.

“Come on, you should know the answer to that by now. Don’t make me look like a loser,” I laughed, hoping to smooth things over.

“Sorry,” she mumbled awkwardly.

Ugh, now I made her apologize. Guilt slowly crept over me. At this point, I couldn’t possibly turn her down without doing some serious damage.

“Okay, look—that was a joke. A bad joke. I’m sorry for screwing with you like that, because I do actually want to go.”

All at once, Adachi’s stiff expression softened, as though her whole body had turned to jelly. She was the type of girl who always wore her emotions on her sleeve, and I for one appreciated the lack of ambiguity.

As for me, I’d only grown more and more complicated as I got older. *Probably something I should work on.*

“Anywhere in particular you wanted to go?” I asked, knowing full well the answer would be no.

“Not really, but...”

“But?” I prompted, since it sounded like she had more to say.

“I kinda want something sweet.”

Adachi stared down at the floor, burying her chin in her scarf. Her face’s upper and lower halves moved in two directions; her gaze pointed right, while her lips curled upward in a stiff half-smile. A hell of a feat, to say the least. I wasn’t sure I could replicate it.

“So, you wanna get some kind of sugary snack?” I asked. *Would sugar fix whatever’s going on with your face?*

For some reason, her shoulders flinched in response. “Uhh... yeah. A snack.”

“What, so a non-sugary snack?”

“No, no, sugary’s good,” she answered in a tiny voice that I could barely make out through her pouted lips.

For some reason, it felt like I was missing something, but, eh, at least I had a general idea of what she wanted. If we went to the mall, we could buy all kinds of junk food—a lot of it sugary, some of it savory. *Ooh, or we could get donuts again. That sounds pretty good, actually.*

It was nice to be able to think back to decent memories for a change. I’d left lots of stuff in the past thus far, and that wasn’t about to stop anytime soon. However, as long as I had some small amount of enjoyable times to look back on, that was good enough for me. To facilitate that, I’d have to create the memories myself. Throw enough spaghetti at the wall, blah blah blah.

I decided to spend my afternoon with Adachi, who was still acting as bizarre as ever.

Yep, just another ordinary afternoon.

Judging by my tendency to ride double on Adachi’s bike, maybe I was still technically a bad kid on the inside. Granted, according to my little sister, I would always be a “bad kid” as long as my hair was bleached... But, lately, I wasn’t sure what to do with it anymore. My hair, I mean. With my dark roots starting to show, I looked like a burnt flan.

Should I re-bleach it, or let it grow out? Either way, I needed to pick one and commit to it. I couldn’t keep waffling forever.



A little under twenty minutes later, we arrived at Adachi's chosen destination: the large mall we'd visited together on Christmas. Its vast, sprawling parking lot was dimly lit under the setting sun.

Adachi and I weren't the only teenagers around, either. Plenty of people milled about wearing uniforms from other schools, all of them exhaling white fog. The sight reminded me of just how cold it was outside, which in turn sent a shiver down my spine. How I yearned to reunite with the toasty-warm *kotatsu* table back at home. *But that'll be hours from now at this rate*, I thought as I watched Adachi lock up her bike.

A few steps inside the mall, she reached out and pinched my index finger between hers, hesitantly holding it aloft. Her skin was about as warm as the mall itself, which is to say, *very*. Warmer than outside, anyway.

"Can we...?"

Apparently, she wanted to hold hands. *Well, at least she's started asking permission first. That's an improvement...I guess.* A pink flush ran across her cheeks in a straight line, possibly from the stark temperature change.

"Go for it," I nodded, and a moment later, she clamped down on my hand like a vise. She gazed at our intertwined fingers for a moment, then hastily lowered our arms back to our sides.

I really didn't mind holding hands with her, but it bothered me the way she always got so tense about it. She faced straight forward, almost as if everything from the neck up was frozen in place. *If I knocked on her cheek, would I hear an echo? Is she still human? She's not even blinking!*

"So, what are we doing? Getting something sugary?"

"Yeah," Adachi nodded stiffly.

"Okay, well, there's a donut shop right over there," I suggested, since it was entirely possible she couldn't turn her head to see it.

It wasn't the same chain we went to at the train station, but it was still pretty decent, in my opinion. And, since donuts were like 90 percent sugar, the shop struck me as a satisfying solution for her

craving. Still, I had the feeling that, if we went inside, Yashiro would show up out of nowhere and get in line behind us...or would she?

Adachi stopped short, turned, and peered into the donut shop—on her tiptoes, no less. *What on earth is she doing?* I watched her for a moment, then followed suit, turning toward the front of the store. This donut shop was right near the main mall entrance, and it had very few walls, enabling passersby to see clear through to the counter display.

Of course, this meant the employees could see *us*, too. I felt them looking at us—the awkward weirdo, and the curious girl holding her hand. Or maybe it was just the hand-holding thing. *Is it really that weird? Hmm. I guess it is.* I averted my gaze.

Diagonally behind us was an info board with movie times listed on it. An opposite-sex couple stood in front of it, holding hands as they scanned it up and down. Pretty normal stuff. Likewise, a mom held hands with her young son as they walked into a nearby EDION. The mom bent over slightly to accommodate this, and she looked tired, but otherwise, yep, seemed pretty normal. Then there was me and Adachi... Weren't we a little too old to be holding hands?

“Ngh...”

I groaned before I could stop myself. It felt like the mall's entire natural ecosystem had taken one look at us and come crashing to a halt. All eyes were on our limp, tepid hands.

Unfortunately, it was too late to take it back and pretend it never happened. That applied to a lot of things, actually. When it came to relationships, ending things was always a thousand times harder than starting them. Take this very moment, for example: could I pull my hand away right here and now? No. My life had led me into this situation, and all I could do was keep going with the flow to see where it took me next.

It would take a great deal of courage and conviction to derail this train—and those were luxuries I simply didn't have.

“Nope,” Adachi muttered in a small voice, then looked back at me anxiously, as she often did these days. Back when we first met, she used to be a lot more relaxed, but alas. “Sorry, but I'm not

really...feeling it.”

“Okay.” I didn’t know what that was supposed to mean, but I decided to accept it regardless. *You do you.* “In the mood for something more Japanese?”

“Not...exactly...” She tilted her head at me, puzzled.

You think YOU'RE confused? Try being me right now!

“Anything you have in mind?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, no...yeah, no.” She shook her head. *Wait, but then, how do you know you don't want Japanese sweets?*

My little friend was acting especially finicky today, and I found myself wishing she would just be straightforward with me for a change. I envisioned it in my mind’s eye: Adachi, perfectly eloquent at all times.

Yeah, no, that's not Adachi.

This trembling baby fawn I saw before me? *That* was my Adachi.

With no clear destination in mind (as far as I knew, anyway), she started walking, and I followed. “That reminds me—I wanted to ask you...”

“Yeah?” said Adachi.

“Do you think I should bleach my hair again? Or go back to my natural color?” I asked, toying with a random strand. If I couldn’t decide on my own, then clearly I needed an outsider’s perspective to help me make the final call.

At my question, Adachi ran her gaze over me—from my scalp to my shoes. *Not sure what my shoes have to do with it, but okay.* Maybe she was taking my overall aesthetic into account before she answered. After a long and thorough examination, she closed her eyes, as if pausing to imagine my two hair options.

You know it's not that serious, right?

With her eyes closed, she was perfectly unguarded. I couldn’t help but think about all the pranks I could pull on her right now. I could pinch her lips until they puffed out like sausages, or stretch her cheeks until she looked like a squirrel... *Ugh, I sound like a little kid. Cringe.*

Then Adachi opened her eyes, and I officially lost my chance to mess with her. She stared at my roots and furrowed her brow.

“I’ve never seen dark Shimamura, so it’s hard to say for sure.”

“Yeah, I keep my dark side safely locked away! Heh heh heh!” I joked after a pause.

To be honest, I didn’t really like the sound of “dark Shimamura,” but whatever. Admittedly, if you asked me to choose between “dark Shimamura” and “light Shimamura,” the first one *did* sound cooler. But I digress.

“See, I’m kinda caught in the middle right now, so I gotta make a decision soon,” I explained, running a hand through my hair to show her. For some reason, as the strands slipped through my fingers, Adachi reached out and caught them—as if she was the other half of an hourglass, and my hair was the sand.

Speaking of which, I’d wanted to get an hourglass for a while. I would try to remind myself to buy one, only to inevitably forget later on. The plan always slipped away from me...like sand. Poetic.

Adachi stared at the hair in her palm. Her gaze was so impassioned, I had to wonder if she had a personal opinion to offer on the subject.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

She immediately flung my hair away. “Nothing,” she blurted out.

Doesn’t really SEEM like nothing, I thought as I smoothed my hair, but I held my tongue.

In the end, I never got a clear answer out of her about my hair. Instead, she simply started walking. We passed KFC, then OOTOYA, then Shabu Sai, until we reached a branching walkway. There, on the right-hand side, was a Western-style cake shop.

“What about this one?” I suggested. Once again, Adachi craned her neck to peer inside. *What’s the matter with you?*

“Yeah, this one looks good,” she replied. *Finally*. I was dying to know what her lofty standards were, but the squirrely look on her face suggested that she wasn’t about to tell me.

The yellow store sign was adorned with a cartoon of an old

man named...*Beard? Really? Gee, how creative.* A delicious, doughy scent wafted from inside, drifting up my nostrils and tickling the back of my throat. From the looks of it, the store's main products were cream croissants, *choux au craquelin*, and cheesecakes. Definitely sugary, and definitely not Japanese. This would surely meet Adachi's requirements, right?

The cake shop offered "limited-edition" chocolate cream puffs, too. But, honestly, I couldn't really tell them apart from the dark-brown deep-fried cream puffs next to them. I glanced over Adachi's shoulder at the poster behind her and realized what the limited-edition chocolate pastries were for: Valentine's Day.

Oh, right. I forgot that was around the corner.

I'd need to pick up something for my bratty sister, or else she'd never let me hear the end of it. And this year, I could already foresee Yashiro standing right next to her, holding her little hands out expectantly. I heaved a small sigh.

With long, awkward strides, Adachi stumbled around me until she reached my opposite side—still holding my hand, mind you. Naturally, this forced me to spin in a circle to accommodate her. Her palm was getting sweaty, and she was doing the neck-craning thing again, peering behind me as nonchalantly as possible.

I turned to follow her gaze. Only one thing of interest was behind me: the Valentine's Day poster featuring limited-edition products.

"Valentine's," Adachi murmured. Her voice cracked a bit as she read the rest of the advertisement aloud, her eyes glazed over slightly.

"Yep, that's what it says," I agreed.

She started to hiccup, her gaze flitting restlessly to and fro.
Dude. Chill.

"It's already that...*hic* ...time of year, huh?"

As you can imagine, having the hiccups made it impossible for Adachi to play it cool, no matter how hard she tried. Fortunately, even I wasn't *that* oblivious.

"What about it?" I pressed.

Instantly, Adachi grew visibly flustered. "Huh? Oh, well, nothi

—*hic*—nothing much, really,” she stammered. Her eyes darted around in all directions as if she was drawing a spiral with her gaze, her face a kaleidoscope of colorful expressions, her words punctuated by the occasional hiccup.

Did she bring me to the cake shop to strike up a conversation about Valentine’s Day? That would certainly explain why she’d passed on getting donuts. *Man, talk about convoluted.* Or perhaps “beating around the bush” was more apt than “convoluted,” considering the lap she’d done around me just now. *Guess that makes me the bush.*

Did Adachi want gift advice? If so, then who the hell was the recipient? Did she have some secret boyfriend I didn’t know about? No way. Not possible. If she did, then *surely* I would’ve noticed hints by now, and rest assured, I hadn’t. In fact, I’d never seen her spend time with *anyone*, besides...well...*me* .

Which would mean...

“Is it me?”

That was the answer I arrived at via the process of elimination.

Adachi flinched and staggered backward until it looked like she was about to fall over. Thinking quickly, I tugged her by the hand I already held—but then she stumbled forward with the momentum, her face crashing into my chest. End result: a surprise hug I didn’t know I wanted. Now I could smell her scent mixed with the pastries’ sugary fragrance.

Adachi froze, hunched over against me, and at that point I wasn’t really sure what to do next. Considering our height difference, it wasn’t exactly the most natural position to stand in, and I wasn’t easily able to support her weight.

Her eyes were still wide open, frozen in shock. I watched as—right before my eyes—the blood rushed to her head, starting from her neck and slowly working its way up to her scalp. Meanwhile, her gaze flew around at a speed I didn’t know was humanly possible. I’d never seen anything like it.

Gripped with emotion, she slowly pushed herself back to her feet, using my shoulders for support. Then, a beat later, she seemed to snap back to reality. The blood drained from her face, and she

clutched at her hair. Then she started shaking her head vigorously in denial. Denial of what, I didn't know, but she was bouncing all over the place like one of those spring-loaded toys. Suffice it to say, it was...kind of freaking me out.

I couldn't just let her have this meltdown right in front of the store, lest we cause a disturbance. I pulled her away, taking wide, awkward steps as I physically dragged her off. On the other side of the walkway was a Japanese restaurant, its display window all decked out with...tuna. *Romantic*. Fortunately, this increased distance from the Valentine's Day poster seemed to help Adachi calm down.

Considering the contrived way in which she'd attempted to start this conversation, I wasn't really sure what she was about to say, but I decided to give her a minute. Finally, she asked, "Do you have any...plans...for the fourteenth?"

"Nope."

Sure enough, I was right. It was like the Christmas thing all over again. Apparently, Adachi's bizarre antics were a reliable precursor to some kind of invitation. *Feels like I've learned something new about her.*

"Then...would you want to...hang out that day?"

She spoke haltingly, like she'd given up on playing it cool. Probably for the best. Her mouth opened and closed wordlessly as her eyes looked to me for help. Her ears, her nose, and even the backs of her hands flushed bright red until she nearly matched the tuna display behind her.

Adachi tuna... That almost sounds like it could be a real species. Bluefin tuna, bigeye tuna, Adachi tuna...

I hastily derailed this idiotic train of thought. We weren't going to get anywhere unless I said something. Fast.

"Well, uh...do you want me to get *you* chocolate, or do you want to get *me* chocolate?"

I had a feeling this wasn't the right question to be asking, but I couldn't stop myself. Staring blankly, Adachi twirled her index fingers around each other in a little circle.

"I want you to—well, actually, either way—I mean, like, an

exchange sort of thing?”

Both of us, huh? It was more than I expected her to ask for. Still, at least now I could see what she was getting at.

“Hmmm...”

I’d bought chocolate for my sister before, but never for a friend, and the two weren’t exactly the same thing. Of course, Hino and Nagafuji did it every year, supposedly...but me and Adachi?

I imagined the two of us in their shoes—me as Hino and Adachi as Nagafuji. *Nope. No way.* Their friendship was in a whole different league; my friendship with Adachi couldn’t possibly last as long as theirs. How many years did Adachi and I have left, anyway? Would we make it to the end of high school? Or would we end up in different classes next year and gradually drift apart? *Wouldn’t be the first time.*

In elementary school, you couldn’t have paid me to go into any other classrooms. Probably because there were usually teachers in there. Or perhaps it was because I knew I didn’t “belong” in there, so I didn’t feel comfortable “trespassing.” Once upon a time, I’d lost a friend because of that...and now I couldn’t even remember her name.

Plus, now that I was in high school, that just felt like *way* too much effort. I couldn’t imagine myself ever wanting to go to all the trouble of—*wait a minute* .

Now that I thought about it, the chances were high that Adachi would simply track me down herself. Maybe a class change wouldn’t be enough to end our friendship. The thought felt reassuring somehow.

At this point, I’d known Adachi long enough to have an idea of who she was as a person, and this chocolate-exchange idea was so very *her* . Considering the way she always jumped at any opportunity to hold my hand, I could tell that she was starved for human connection. Maybe she longed to create the sort of idealized friendship she’d never had. Far be it from me to blame every little thing on her family situation, but I was pretty sure her frosty relationship with her mother was at least partially to blame.

Not that I had any intention of being Adachi’s surrogate mom, of course.

“Don’t you think it kind of ruins the fun, planning this out in advance?” I asked.

It was like if Santa sent me a letter telling me he was coming to my house and detailing exactly what he was bringing me. To me, it didn’t matter whether I actually liked the gift itself; the *mystery* was the fun part. Maybe that was because I’d spent my life never really yearning for any specific thing.

Adachi considered my opinion for a moment, then slowly shook her head. “Surprises are overrated; I’d rather know. That way, I don’t get my hopes up over nothing.”

“Really...?”

She nodded slightly. Apparently, she sincerely felt this way. Personally, I had trouble grasping it.

“Besides, there’re still a hundred other problems,” she added.

I heard her mutter something under her breath, but she was all hunched over, so I could barely make it out. *Problems, huh? Yeah, well, for every one of your “problems,” I’ve got a hundred questions to go along with it.*

Still, instead of just going with the flow, Adachi was trying to fight against the current. She had the courage and conviction I lacked, and I could respect that...even if I *did* sometimes feel as if she was using me as a stepping stone.

So, this is what I told her: “Sounds good. I guess you can be my Valentine this year.”

The way I saw it, my life was one long, unending gray blur... but the events of today, February 4, sprinkled a tiny bit of color into the ten days that followed.

Interlude:
A Visit to the Butcher's Shop
Part 4

“**C**AN I LIFT YOU real quick?”

I was at Nagafuji's house after school, lounging around under the *kotatsu* table, when Nagafuji asked me her most bizarre question yet. She'd been staring at me—or, rather, zoning out in my direction—for a while now.

“Can you what?”

“Lift you.”

“What for?”

“To see if I can,” she explained dutifully. I couldn't begin to fathom how her brain came up with this idea.

“Okay, well, I'm too tired to get up. Drag me out,” I groaned, reaching out to her.

Sure enough, she responded by grabbing my hand and *literally* dragging me from under the *kotatsu*. Fortunately, the heater was on, so the room was by no means chilly.

Nevertheless, the cold air always seemed to settle near the floor, like hoarfrost.

“Help me up!”

I wiggled my hand until Nagafuji hoisted me upward and to the side. Eventually, through a series of adjustments on the X and Y axes and absolutely no effort on my part, I successfully reached a standing position.

“Okay, I'm up! Oof—now I feel dizzy. And my ears are ringing like crazy.”

Here I was, lamenting my suffering, and yet Nagafuji ignored me completely. She put her hands under my armpits. *Oh my god, she's actually doing it*. Startled, I flailed my dangling feet. Meanwhile, she lifted me higher and higher until I hung there like the lion cub in that one movie. Now I was taller than she was.

While it was refreshing to see from a different viewpoint for a change, it kinda made me want to pass out, coupled with the ringing ears and vertigo. Nagafuji's arms started to shake harder and harder, until eventually she hit her limit and was forced to set me back down.

"You're heavier than I thought," she commented as she massaged her bicep.

"Hey ! Rude much?!"

I'd rather die than be short AND heavy! If I were heavy, I would've sounded like a sack of potatoes when I hit the ground! But I didn't! So there!

"What was the point of that, anyway?"

"I just figured I could probably lift you."

"Ugh, forget it." Knowing Nagafuji, that really was her only reason. There were never any hidden depths with her.

I slid back under the *kotatsu* , and this time she joined me. Then she took her glasses off. *Why does it feel as if she always takes her glasses off whenever she's with me?*

I'd never bothered to ask her about it, because I knew I'd only get an ambiguous answer, like the one she'd given me just now.

As I collapsed forward onto the table, I exhaled and watched as my breath made the desk calendar's pages flutter slightly. I blew on it again, for fun this time. Then I noticed the holiday coming up ten days from now: Valentine's Day.

"That reminds me—do you want chocolates again this year?"

We'd exchanged gifts on Valentine's since I was a kid, so by now it was kind of a tradition. At one point, it turned into this crazy competition in which we tried to one-up each other with the weirdest chocolate we could find, but lately we'd gone back to tamer gifts. You see, when it came to food, dear sweet Nagafuji-chan only liked "normal" stuff, like curry and Salisbury steak. If I was getting her a gift, I figured I might as well make it something I knew she would like.

"Sure," she said. "I like candy."

"All right, then, I guess that's a yes."

Of course, we never did anything super special—we just went to the store together, picked out our chocolate together, and ate it together. End of story.

But, to us, that was Valentine's Day.

~ Today's Adachi Forecast~

“Ada-chee!”

I imagined Shimamura's voice pronouncing my name with extra emphasis on the last syllable. It was pretty cute.

God...I really shouldn't be thinking about this stuff in the middle of class.

Chapter 2: Heliotrope (Seeking the Sun's Sparkle)

AS SOON AS I GOT HOME, I went straight to my room, collapsed onto my bed, and slammed my face into my pillow. I remembered taking Shimamura home, but everything after that was a blur of colors, like a sunset. Frankly, it was a miracle I made it home safely at all.

All day, my face had burned white-hot, to the point that I questioned whether maybe summer had come early this year. My ears itched, too. Then the pillow dust slowly settled around my head, and the color filtering in through the window made me realize that the sun *was*, in fact, setting. Knowing me, my face was probably every bit as red as that sky right now.

Every time the memory flashed through my head, I writhed thinking about all the cringey things I did and said, kicking my feet and slamming my face repeatedly against the bed. Once I got it all out of my system, I raised my head and contemplated getting up. My back was still twisted around awkwardly, so I lowered my head once more. *Guess I'll give it another five minutes.*

A low whine escaped my lips. My parents generally never offered me so much as a passing glance, but if they saw the way I was acting right now, maybe they'd actually pay attention for a change.

"God, I acted like such a freak..."

At least things had worked out in my favor.

Last month, I was sure God wasn't real, but maybe I was wrong. Maybe he was simply a giant bully who liked to stress me out. And now that I'd officially made plans with Shimamura, I had even *more* to worry about.

"Chocolate," I muttered aloud, naming the snack that was surely going to melt my brain into fondue. The faint smell of fabric softener descended as I pulled my blanket over my head.

This would be my first time ever giving anyone a Valentine's gift, as well as my first time receiving one. Well, unless you counted the chocolate my parents gave me when I was a kid. Personally, I chose not to. It wasn't like it mattered either way. It didn't change the fact that this was the first time I actually *wanted* a Valentine's gift.

Valentine's Day was more than a week away, and yet... Well, actually, considering all the planning ahead of me, maybe I had less time than I thought. Was I going to make this chocolate myself? *No, that'd be too intense...or would it? No, yeah, definitely.* How could I make chocolate without any prior experience in the kitchen? Was that something I could get good at with a little research and practice? Even then, it would still be too intense for a casual gift.

I should do what I did for Christmas and buy her something she'll like. Yeah, that'd be good... Yeah.

But then again...

This was my first—and quite possibly last—experience with Valentine's Day chocolate, and I wanted to make the most of it. Unfortunately, I had no surefire way of accomplishing that. The second I attempted to figure out the “right” move, my head started to ache. At the rate I was going, I *really* wasn't sure that I was going to survive the next ten days. *By the time the big day rolls around, I'll be an empty husk.*

“Homemade...homemade... First things first, I'll have to find out what she likes.”

I doubted that anyone but Shimamura herself would know the answer, so I'd have to ask her directly. But if I was too gung-ho about it, then I'd come off as overeager, so I'd have to strike some sort of balance. *That* was the tricky part, as I'd proved earlier today with my cringey behavior. The mere memory made my nose burn.

Relax. It's no big deal, I lied to myself in order to calm down. It's just a platonic...you know...friendly gift exchange or whatever.

Which meant that—barring some kind of weird baking competition—a handmade gift would be wayyyy too much.

Of course, if *she* had made *me* something, I would've absolutely *loved* that. I would've *killed* for that. If I could have wished on a shooting star for *anything*, it would've been that.

I wanted to be just as special to Shimamura as she was to me; I wanted to have a unique connection no one else could replicate. But I didn't know how to achieve that, and if I asked her for it flat-out, then it would lose all meaning. I needed Shimamura to be a willing, enthusiastic participant...and thus, I would need to nonchalantly guide her in that direction.

Ha, good one . After all the humiliation I'd caused myself, I knew full well that there was nothing "nonchalant" about me. I'd tried dozens of times to "casually" steer the conversation, only to end up in a panic—I just wasn't capable of keeping my cool. Instead, I shook like a leaf until my desired topic shot out of my mouth at 100 miles per hour.

God, I'm pathetic. At this stage, it was a little too late to curse my idiocy...but still, sometimes I really hated my own guts.

I shook my head and rolled onto my side, my motions kicking up dust and detritus.

What I really wanted was far, far softer than chocolate—so soft, it kept slipping through my fingers. Valentine's Day was merely a conduit through which I could just barely graze it.

~Wednesday, February 5~

All through class, I slipped in and out of countless daydreams about Shimamura and chocolate. *Maybe I'm a little obsessed. Yeah, just a little*. To be fair, these classes were frequently boring. Since the seating arrangement prevented me from looking at Shimamura, the best I could do was use my imagination to while away my free time—and sometimes my non-free time.

In a blink, school was over for the day, and the rapid passage of time made my blood run cold. What if all ten days went by as fast as this one? In the past, I would've loved nothing more than to speed through my dull everyday life on fast-forward, but now I felt a bit differently. For the first time in my life, I had gained something truly important...and, as a result, I was constantly stressed out.

As I tidied up my desk drawer's contents, I glanced backward to see a summery, sunburnt Hino and a very sleepy-looking

Nagafuji at Shimamura's desk. After a brief farewell, the two headed out of the classroom. Would Shimamura give *them* chocolate, too? Knowing her, she'd gladly return the favor for any gift she received, but she would never initiate gift-giving of her own accord.

Then, for some reason, I thought about the little alien girl. I hadn't really seen her around Shimamura much lately...at least, not that I could remember. Who *was* she, anyway? *What* was she?

On top of that, it was possible that Shimamura had made similar plans to exchange chocolates with other friends I'd never met. I only knew one small side of her, after all—no, even less than that. She was *notoriously* hard to read. She wasn't conflict-averse; she just sincerely didn't care about a lot of things. If I tried to hold on to her, I'd slide right off, like water off a duck's back.

Not that I especially cared if Shimamura wanted to exchange chocolates with other girls. Or rather, it wasn't any of my business, so did I really have any say in the matter? No, I didn't. I knew that. Yet...I realized that if I witnessed it happening right in front of me, I probably couldn't just shrug it off.

I felt myself get dizzy, so I paused to take a deep breath. I was freaking myself out over nothing, and if a single thought could send me into a panic attack, then maybe my condition was more serious than I thought. Maybe now I understood what it felt like to procrastinate on treating an illness until it was too late.

Deep down, under all my denial and bravado, it would really crush me to witness Shimamura give chocolates to someone else. Knowing me, I might even cry. In other words, I didn't *want* her to.

The more honest I was with myself, the more it felt like I was hauling all my worst traits up to the surface. I needed to scoop them out of the water, or else no one would want to be around me anymore. I could only pray that I was keeping my water clean enough. If possible, I wanted to be the one to help purify Shimamura's water, too.

I glanced back over my shoulder, and this time, Shimamura's desk was completely empty. Evidently, she'd already gone home for the day. *Oh no*. I stuffed the rest of my books into my bag hastily.

Sometimes, I really wished she would stop by my desk before

she headed out, but she never did. It was kind of frustrating.

Bookbag in hand, I hurried into the hall and looked around for Shimamura, but couldn't see her. I started running. Then, belatedly, my legs registered the chilly hallway air. Shimamura apparently took priority over my five senses.

Finally, at the bottom of the staircase, I spotted her. She was hunched over, probably from the cold. Her sleeves were tugged down over her fingers, exposing her shoulders. As I approached, she must've heard my footsteps, because she turned in my direction.

"Oh, hey, Adachi." Her eyes asked, "What's up?"

Slowly, carefully, consciously, I opened my mouth to speak. Thinking about it, this was quite possibly the first time I'd spoken all day.

"I was wondering what your favorite kind of chocolate is."

There we go. That sounded pretty casual. Yeah, not bad.

I never used to police my own behavior like this, but perhaps that was proof of just how bizarre I was acting lately. My lips were still a little stiff, but overall my question was an improvement.

"My favorite ? Hmmm...I don't really eat it that often, but let's see..."

She gazed down to the end of the hall as she ruminated on my question. Fortunately, she didn't seem uncomfortable answering. *That's a relief.*

"No, let's not go there," she muttered to herself under her breath, but I didn't know what she was talking about. Then she looked back at me. "Honestly, I'll eat anything sweet."

"Right."

As far as I knew, most chocolate was sweet. *Should I press for more details, or just accept that she's easy to please?*

"I think I like milk chocolate the best, since the flavor's not too overpowering," she added, almost as an afterthought.

"Gotcha."

In my mind's eye, I pictured milk chocolate—its color reminiscent of Shimamura's soft brown hair.

It felt as if this was the first time on record that she'd ever admitted to *liking* something...and, for some reason, I found it really touching.

"Was that all you wanted?" she asked, after a long moment of awkward silence.

"Yeah."

More silence. All around us, other students walked past on their way out of the building.

"Okay."

"Cool."

"All right then, time to head home!" she announced, her tone decidedly "let's get this show on the road." She was probably eager to get out of the cold, and I didn't blame her.

I walked with her to the school gates, where we peaceably went our separate ways. When I reached the street corner, I realized I was still on foot, so I ran back to school to get my bike.

It stuck out like a sore thumb, yet I couldn't bring myself to hide it away.

The boomerang, I mean.

Late that night, I grabbed it off the shelf where it served as a decoration. To be clear, I didn't *want* to let my Christmas gift from Shimamura collect dust up there, but at the same time, I wasn't about to actually *play* with it. Did she really expect me to go outside and throw it around for fun? I didn't believe—didn't *want* to believe—that she'd misjudged me quite that hard. I agonized over the boomerang for a moment, then lazily flung it. It soared directly into my closet, where it hit the wall and fell to the floor with a soft *thump* .

Bleh .

Right as I bent down to retrieve it, however, I caught sight of the TV screen out of the corner of my eye and nearly jumped out of my skin.

A woman with heavy makeup, referred to as “Shaman Taoka,” was dancing in time to music. By “dancing,” I mean she swung her hair in a circle like she was in a kabuki lion dance. Her movements were so violent, I half-expected her hair to whip right out of the screen. Other actors stood on the sidelines, waiting for their entrance, but this woman kept them all at bay. It was impressive the way she seemed to command their attention.

Once her dance finished, Shaman So-and-So stood there, shoulders heaving as she gasped for breath. You’d think that the camera would’ve cut away from that part. Meanwhile, I was still frozen mid-stoop, trying to figure out what the hell this TV show was supposed to be.

I soon discovered that it was some sort of horoscope show. Romantic horoscopes, specifically. *Not sure what that kabuki dance had to do with anything, but okay.* Still, the word “romantic” made my ears perk up a bit. *Not that my relationship with Shimamura is romantic or anything. Because it isn’t.*

Yet...I still wanted to watch the show.

Judging from the “Tomorrow’s Horoscope” section, this show aired every day of the week. The show went down the list of astrological signs, starting with Capricorn, then Aquarius, then Pisces, and so on. Even as I rolled my eyes and wondered how much they got paid to write this rubbish, I waited patiently for my star sign to come up.

Meanwhile, the Shaman was dripping with sweat to the point that it completely ruined her heavy makeup. *Don’t quit your day job.*

“Next up, Libra! Your love life is headed into a stormy patch, so don’t forget to monitor your surroundings!”

“What...?”

As a Libra, this was a horoscope I wasn’t exactly excited to receive. I always considered my “love life” dead in the water, but...I mean...if it was alive and kicking, then I certainly didn’t want it to get stormy. Which one of us would the waves hit? Me or Shimamura?

And another thing: “monitor my surroundings”? The word “monitor” made it all sound so creepy. *What do you think I am, a stalker? Because I’m not. Far from it.*

Of course, I hadn't expected the horoscope to be accurate in the first place, so there was no sense in me worrying about it.

After the show read through all the star signs, they launched into their advertising segment. "Our Valentine's promotion is ongoing! During the promotion, listen for the clue at the end of each episode. Collect them all for a very special prize! Today's clue is 'D'!"

"D." *Got it. Cool.* But it wasn't quite the end of the episode yet, so it felt as though they'd jumped the gun on that announcement. *Whatever.*

After that, for some reason, they showed compatibility charts between each of the star signs. According to the charts, Libra was "strongly compatible" with Gemini and Aquarius, but *most* compatible with Aries (of the opposite sex, specifically; Aries of the same sex were the "most incompatible," apparently). Of course, I wasn't sure how they decided all this, so I certainly wasn't about to buy into it.

And yet...

When's Shimamura's birthday?

Not that I planned to take this TV show as gospel, but it did make me a little curious.

Gemini or Aquarius. Gemini or Aquarius. Worst-case scenario, anything but Aries, I prayed silently, over and over, even though I knew (based on the results of the seating-arrangement shuffle) that my prayers were worthless.

After the show finished, I regained my composure and shook my head at my own idiocy.

As if this rubbish would actually be accurate.

~Thursday, February 6~

"Uhh...Adachi?"

Shimamura looked up at me as I stood next to her desk, but I couldn't take it anymore.

"It's nothing."

With that, I hastily returned to my seat. Then the teacher walked in. *Whew. Made it by the skin of my teeth.*

Later, at lunch...

“Adachi?”

Once again, I was right next to Shimamura, gazing at her. I was so out of it, however, I couldn’t even taste my sandwich. I hadn’t noticed anything “stormy” thus far...except maybe the dubious look Shimamura was fixing me with.

“Did you want something?” she prompted, gesturing at her sandwich and drink. Wrapped around her wrist was a blue friendship bracelet, which caught my attention, since she didn’t generally wear a lot of accessories. Anyway, I wasn’t *trying* to give her a puppy-dog look or anything, but evidently she misread me.

“No, I’m okay,” I mumbled, holding up my sandwich. Then I decided to ask her the question I’d promised myself I would pose today at lunchtime. Not that I bought into that horoscope nonsense, but... “Shimamura, what’s your sign?”

Belatedly, I realized that it would’ve been more natural to just ask her birthday. Then it hit me—on the off-chance Shimamura watched the same TV show, she might mistakenly think...

Well, it wouldn’t exactly be a mistake, would it? Wait, no! Yes, it would!

Meanwhile, ignorant of my inner turmoil, Shimamura tilted her head and mused to herself. “My sign...? I’m not sure which one I am, to be honest. I was born in April, though. April 10.”

I felt all the joy melt out of my body. Don’t get me wrong, I was excited to learn a new fact about her, but...if she was born on April 10, then she was an Aries. And an Aries had the *worst possible compatibility* with a same-sex Libra.

“Adachi? Helloooo?”

“For the record, I’m a Taurus!” Hino announced unprompted, popping up out of nowhere right next to Shimamura.

“Whoa!” Shimamura recoiled reflexively, her eyes wide in shock.

Behind Hino stood Nagafuji, swaying ever-so-casually from

side to side with a look on her face that said she was *dying* for someone to ask her what *her* sign was.

Once Shimamura recovered from the surprise, she swiftly picked up on this body language. “What about you, Nagafuji-chan?”

“What you see is what you get! Virgo, the virgin!” she declared proudly.

“I feel like we should switch. You’re way more of a cow than I am,” Hino remarked, reaching out to prod Nagafuji’s ample udders. Nagafuji naturally swatted her hand away, as per usual.

I seemed to recall Taurus and Virgo having strong compatibility. Maybe the chart was accurate after all. *Wait, no! That would mean that Shimamura and I are completely incompatible! No, no, no! That can’t be right! We wouldn’t be such good friends!*

“Why did you ask about my sign, anyway?” Shimamura asked me. “Are you into astrology or something?”

“Huh? Oh...uhhhh...”

As I struggled to think of a response, however, assistance arrived from the most unlikely of places.

“Oh, I get it. If your star signs are compatible, it improves the success rate for support magic,” Nagafuji volunteered out of nowhere.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Hino murmured, baffled.

Fortunately, that distracted Shimamura long enough for me to evade her question...which meant that, whether she realized it or not, Nagafuji had ultimately helped me. For that, I was sincerely grateful.

I continued to monitor—er, *observe*—the situation until the end of the school day, but Shimamura and I were both the same as usual. The way we were headed, I didn’t see any stormy waves on the horizon whatsoever. The seas were peaceful.

Just as I thought, horoscopes were nothing more than suggestions. It wasn’t even clear who’d originally come up with this rubbish, and I was perfectly content to take it all with a grain of salt. That said, I didn’t want to write astrology off completely. I could simply choose to believe the predictions I liked and safely

ignore all the rest.

In the end, Nagafuji was right. Horoscopes were a form of support magic, helping you to look on the bright side.

I couldn't choose chocolates for Shimamura without a thorough understanding of what she'd be eating. So, once I got home, I changed into my street clothes and headed to the grocery store. I admittedly felt a little hesitant to enter, probably because I didn't generally have the opportunity to go there. Did normal families usually take their kids to look at the candy aisle? If so, I certainly hadn't experienced that myself. I couldn't even remember what I used to snack on. All I remembered was a lot of cold, crisp water.

I took my wallet out to check the contents. Once I made sure I was equipped with enough money, I headed for the chocolate section. Fortunately, despite this particular store's formidable size, I didn't have to search long; there was a large Valentine's Day display right within my line of sight.

On the same shelf, they'd also stocked some pale-pastel rice puffs for Girls' Day on March 3. Sadly, I wasn't confident that this was an effective sales tactic.

Since Shimamura had specified milk chocolate, I went through and picked out all the milk-chocolate varieties available. There was some white chocolate, too, but I wasn't sure she would like it. After an internal debate, I decided to email her to ask. Restless, I stood there, praying to God that Shimamura would answer me quickly so I wouldn't be trapped here forever. Mercifully, she did.

Her answer: "*White chocolate's pretty good.*"

Evidently, she liked it. "But, for some reason, she doesn't like to say that she likes things."

It almost felt as if she didn't want other people...including me...to learn more about her. Disheartened, I let out a sigh. *Guess I'll throw in the white chocolate, too.* Now I was up to a sizeable number of items in my cart. I didn't mind shelling out the money to buy all this, but...could I really eat all of it? *All* of it? On my own?

Diabetes, here I come.

I wrestled with myself for a while longer, until eventually I decided to keep everything. From there, I took my stack of snacks and headed for the register. Just then, I crossed paths with a tall girl from another school. Honestly, I was impressed that she had the nerve to go to the grocery store in her uniform. Plus, she was walking around with a big grin on her face. I couldn't help but stare after her.

There but for the grace of God go I. Did I ever grin like that during class? *No, probably not. I'm probably fine,* I told myself, rubbing my cheek. But I wasn't entirely convinced.

If I'd ever started giggling to myself in class, people would've thought I was a psycho. Actually, no—I'd literally *be* a psycho. But if *Shimamura* ever started giggling in class, I'd just wonder what had put her in such a good mood.

Uh, brain? This is me we're talking about, not Shimamura... Right. Anyway. Let's just keep that in mind.

I gave myself a light slap on the cheek, then continued to the checkout. I hadn't given it much thought when I was carrying everything in my cart, but once I paid for my items and picked up my grocery bag, I realized exactly how *heavy* they all were. Staring down at my chocolate haul, I scratched my cheek.

I'm really not sure I can eat this whole mountain of chocolate.

What if I gave the entire bag to Shimamura? No, no, no. She wouldn't want that!

The mere *thought* of her rejection was enough to crush my spirit. I wanted her to be happy. I wanted her to think of me as special.

But while my aspirations were as lofty as a mountain peak, miles upon miles of flat, empty desert surrounded me.



I swear, I wasn't planning this on purpose. But when I checked my clock, I realized it was time for that horoscope show again. So, I figured I'd hate-watch it and tear them a new one for how inaccurate today's horoscope had been.

I'd left the TV on the same channel. When I powered it on, sure enough, the first thing I saw was the Shaman's long hair flying in all directions. *I guess we're starting with that again.*

"Just so you know, today's horoscope couldn't have been more wrong," I complained aloud, but naturally, the Shaman couldn't hear me. Come to think of it, she'd never said a word during the last episode—maybe she was just the opening act.

Once her Bon Festival-esque "performance" ended, it was time for the main show. Since I didn't have anything better to do, I decided I'd once again watch it all the way to the end.

For Aries, Shimamura's sign, tomorrow's horoscope was, "Be true to yourself, and pursue your desires." Libra's horoscope, however, was written in big bubble letters for some reason. It read, "Change up your hairstyle for a day! Reinvent yourself, and catch that special someone's eye!"

"Change my hairstyle...? How?"

I grabbed a chunk of my hair and stared at it. Normally, I just let it all hang down without doing anything particularly special. If I changed my style and reinvented myself for a day, would Shimamura notice? Idly, I rubbed my toes together. It wasn't that I really bought into this horoscope nonsense, obviously.

This time, the clue was "A." Last time was "D." Not exactly complicated enough to need to write it down. The show hadn't revealed what exactly the "special prize" was, but given the blatant advertising throughout the show, I deduced that it would most likely be leftover stock of something they couldn't sell. A friendship bracelet, or a necklace, or something. Did *anyone* out there still pay money for this snake-oil? Somehow I doubted it.

Yet I understood how it felt to cling to any ray of hope...no matter how small. Desperation tinged my feelings for Shimamura;

deep down, I was terrified that, barring some sort of divine intervention, I might never bridge the gap between us. Perhaps I was *precisely* the sort of sucker who would fall for this nonsense.

I clapped myself lightly on the cheek and sat up a little straighter. *I'd better keep my wits about me.*

~Friday, February 7~

Surely this is drastic enough to get her to notice. I nodded to myself as I admired my painstaking handiwork in the mirror. I'd tried all sorts of hair clips, ribbons, and other accessories, but they all looked either way too stupid or way too ridiculous. Thus, after a series of attempts at slight curls, changing my part, and other minor adjustments, I eventually settled on a plain ponytail. I tied it up using a scrunchie I found lying around—I couldn't remember when or where I bought it, but it certainly came in handy—then shifted its position to my liking. Once I was done, I gazed at myself in the mirror from every angle.

Honestly, I'd rather see Shimamura in a new hairstyle instead. The thought made me blush, and I hastily left the bathroom. *Time to go to school.*

Truth be told, I was a little embarrassed to leave my house like this. It felt as if this drastic hairstyle change announced to the world, “HEY EVERYONE, LOOK AT ME! I'M TRYING TO BE DIFFERENT NOW!” Or was I just being paranoid? I'd need to think of what to tell Shimamura in the event that she asked me about it. After all, I was well aware of just how weird I'd acted lately.

As I steered my bike along, I racked my brain, trying to think of a plausible explanation. Maybe I could say I just felt like changing my hair? I seemed to recall that that was Shimamura's reasoning for bleaching her hair, so maybe she'd relate to it. Question was, could I get the words out without stammering? That was something I continually struggled with lately.

Once I arrived at my desk, I sat down and put my chin in my hands. My ponytail swayed with every tiny movement, and it drove me nuts. Plus, with all my hair tied behind my head, my ears were now extra-sensitive to the cold air. This, too, put me on edge.

Seriously, this had better be worth it, I thought as I eyed the classroom door, waiting for Shimamura to walk in.

Unfortunately, she didn't arrive until right before the bell rang, and she went straight to her seat without so much as a single glance in my direction. Given that I sat between her and the blackboard, I was sure she'd notice my ponytail eventually. Seeing as we couldn't exactly have a conversation in the middle of class, however, I'd need to wait patiently until lunchtime to find out what she thought of it.

Somehow, this was both reassuring and frustrating at the same time.

Normally, I spent my break periods just sitting at my desk and waiting for the break to end. Today, though, I used my free time to look at photos of chocolate online. I was so obsessed, I was pretty sure I'd dreamed of chocolate last night. At this point, my whole brain was one creamy brown blob.

I'd made the executive decision to bring my mountain of chocolate to school with me to eat for lunch for the next few days. I'd specifically bought it so I could learn what it tasted like, which meant I needed to eat all the chocolate myself. Fortunately, I wasn't the sort of person who got bored of eating the same thing over and over, so I was confident I could handle it.

Once I'd tasted all this chocolate, I would know exactly what to give Shimamura. That was the most I could hope to accomplish within the week I had left. I'd halfway given up on actually impressing her with my gift; if anything, I'd consider myself fortunate if I managed to get her a gift at all. I mean, that simple act was still pretty special in and of itself.

I couldn't deny that part of me wanted Shimamura to treat me differently than everyone else. At the same time, though, I knew that I couldn't keep demanding more and more of her, or she'd get sick of me. If I wanted this friendship to be a two-way street, then I needed to act like it. As for how I would go about doing that, my mind found its way back to the idea of homemade chocolates.

When it came to expressing our feelings, we humans really only had two options: create something or buy something. Spend effort or spend money. In my case, I had the cash to spare, since I hadn't touched my earnings from my part-time job. But if I gave Shimamura expensive name-brand chocolates, there was a chance it might make her uncomfortable.

Purely out of curiosity, or so I told myself, I did an internet search for handmade chocolates next. Naturally, there were about a million different results—all sorts of recipe sites and how-to guides. *'Tis the season, I guess.* I tapped around a fair few of them, and since (obviously) chocolate didn't require any knifework, I started to think maybe it wouldn't be that hard to make. With a little practice, maybe even I could create something halfway respectable... appearance-wise, anyway. Whether it would actually be edible was an entirely different story.

Knowing Shimamura, however, she'd probably prefer mass-produced grocery-store chocolate to the questionable, misshapen lumps I could create on my own. Granted, that would be true of just about anybody...unless the lumps came from someone special, of course. *Ugh, then there's no point!*

As I reached up to clutch my head in frustration, a sudden voice in my ear made me reflexively recoil.

"Playing some vidya or something?"

It was Nagafuji, crouching so that she could read my phone screen over my shoulder, squinting and blinking. I thought that her glasses were supposed to help her see better, but maybe not. Startled, I slid down in my seat until my butt was halfway off the chair.

How would she react, seeing photos of chocolate on my screen? Why had she even come to my desk? I didn't think we were that close of friends...or were we?

She straightened up. "Hmmm," she murmured to herself, tilting her head in contemplation. This only confused me more. I sat there and waited for her to say something. Finally she asked, "Do people not say 'vidya' anymore?"

How the hell should I know?

"Well...I don't hear it much these days," I answered.

“Yeah, me neither.”

She hung her head in...guilt? *I'll never understand her for as long as I live.* My only option was to summon her babysitter to come get her. “Where’s Hino?”

“Asleep.”

I turned my gaze in the direction Nagafuji indicated. Sure enough, Hino was collapsed forward, her cheek pressed against her desk, her arms dangling off its sides, sound asleep for all the world to see. It was very...*unique*, to say the least. But, hey, she seemed to be making the most of her limited free time.

Next, I glanced over my shoulder to see what Shimamura was up to. Like me, she stared down at her phone screen. Perhaps she was planning for Valentine’s Day, too... Maybe not to the same obsessive extent that I was, but still.

Then again, knowing her, she’d probably wait until the fourteenth, go buy chocolate from whatever store, then hand it over with a shrug. End of story.

Although part of me cautioned myself not to get my hopes up for anything special, another part of me was keen to point out that Shimamura had, in fact, chosen my Christmas present in advance... and I wanted to believe that lightning would strike twice. But it wasn’t every day that Shimamura went out of her way for me, and it was entirely possible that the Christmas gift was the last present I’d ever get from her. The more time I spent with her, the more I understood just how grand these gestures were. Coming from her, anyway.

That said, I *really* didn’t understand why she ever thought to give me a boomerang.

Still squinting, Nagafuji glanced over in Shimamura’s direction, then back at me. She clapped me on the shoulder. “Good luck.” With that, she returned to her desk.

There wasn’t much palpable sincerity in her tone. For that matter, I wasn’t even sure what this “good luck” was *for*, exactly, since I strongly doubted that Nagafuji knew about my Valentine’s Day plans. Still...if I was honest with myself, I needed all the luck I could get. The second I let my guard down, time would fly by on fast-forward, and I’d miss my chance to have a special day with

Shimamura.

In a blink, I'd gone from having ten days left to having just seven...and I suspected that it was Shimamura stealing all my time away.

Back at home, I zoned out for a while. Every time I thought back to lunchtime, the next thing I knew, my lips would smile of their own accord. Then I'd cover my mouth with both hands as I took deep breaths and tried not to scream.

Here in the darkness, my body was full of so much warmth and light.

Shimamura had commented on my hair earlier that day at lunch. Of course, it was a small part of a longer conversation, but it was the only part I remembered. First, she touched my ponytail and said, "This is cute." Then she added, "But, then again, your hair's always cute." After that, the rest was a blur.

It wasn't the first time she'd complimented me on my appearance, but this time it felt more real. The *cheongsam* was only a dress, but my *hair* was an inescapable part of who I was. In other words, she called *me* cute. "*Always cute .*" Who wouldn't be over the moon about that?

Maybe those horoscopes weren't all that bad. I was starting to think more highly of this Shaman So-and-So. Not that she really had anything to do with this, probably.

It was time for the horoscope show.

Aries' horoscope was, "Tomorrow they'll play you like a fiddle—so make some sweet music!"

Libra's horoscope was, "Take a day to relax and appreciate how far you've come."

Neither seemed relevant to romance in any way, but then again, everybody needed a quiet day now and then. If each horoscope was something crazy every day, there was no way anyone would believe a word they said.

Today's clue was "N."

“I’m back in action, baby!” the Shaman shouted right before the episode ended.

Maybe all that dancing had helped her get into her groove.

~Saturday, February 8~

On Saturdays, I usually worked the lunch shift at the Chinese restaurant, and today was no exception. Not that I minded that, but I wasn’t crazy about wearing a dress with a slit up the side in the middle of winter. It made me look like some kind of bimbo who prioritized flaunting her legs over more sensible clothing options. Personally, I was tempted to take a needle and thread to the dress and sew the stupid slit right up. Why was I the only person forced to wear that gaudy thing? The restaurant didn’t even pay me extra for it.

As I carried dirty plates from the dining area to the kitchen, I questioned what I was doing with my life. Obviously, it couldn’t hurt to have an income, but...what was I planning to *do* with it? I had nothing to spend it on. That was better than wasting it, I supposed, but there was no point in earning this money if I couldn’t put it to use.

Ultimately, however, I’d signed up for this job out of a need to occupy my time with something productive, and I couldn’t find it in me to quit.

The Shimamura family hadn’t been back since their first visit. That was both a relief and a disappointment. Internally I was plagued by two warring attitudes: the part of me that didn’t want to humiliate myself in front of Shimamura, and the part of me that didn’t mind sharing this secret with her. I knew I couldn’t have it both ways, and yet I was still so greedy. Reflexively, I tugged my skirt hem down.

Did this *cheongsam* help draw in customers?

As I ran around the busy dining hall during the height of the lunch rush, I tried my best not to think about that too deeply. After all, if the answer was yes, I would feel obligated to keep wearing the dress.

Once the restaurant closed to prep for dinner, I sat down at

the nearest table and stared blankly into space. All that remained was to do some light cleaning, and then I could change out of this stupid dress and go home. Once again, this came as both a relief and a disappointment. Deep down, I wasn't eager to go back to that house and be around my family.

How did Shimamura spend her weekends? The last time I'd asked her about it, her response was vague. "Sleeping, usually. Or dealing with my kid sister. Stuff like that." Which meant she was probably spending today just sitting around, bored.

Maybe I could go see her after work. I could sit between her legs and watch TV with her in her room, like last time.

Looking back, it was hard to believe that I was ever brave enough to get that close to Shimamura. I definitely couldn't manage it now—I'd end up freaking out and/or scrambling away.

Speaking of more recent "close encounters," there was that time I'd slipped and stumbled into her chest. What a waste of an opportunity. To this day, I sorely regretted my decision to back away from her so quickly. I'd also regretted it at the cake shop, of course, but that feeling only grew more pronounced over time.

I'd practically buried my nose in her chest...my eyes, too...and my forehead. Basically, my entire face.

As I thought back over the memory, I felt my whole head warm up like a hot air balloon, so I flailed my legs under the table where no one could see.

~Sunday, February 9~

When I walked into my kitchen, my intention was simply to give this a fair shake. As on weekdays, my parents were rarely home on weekends, so I didn't have to worry about any prying eyes. That was something I deeply appreciated. I couldn't stand the thought of them judging me, be it silently or right to my face.

This was my first time using the kitchen for anything other than filling a glass of water, and certainly my first time handling cookware. My plan: to try to make some chocolates. I was inclined to believe that it was a worthwhile use of my Sunday. Or maybe I was just a *tiny* bit influenced by my horoscope, which said, "Libras,

you need to hurry up and make some chocolates for you-know-who! Just do it!”

Oh, and for the record, the clue was “C.”

Is it still a “horoscope” if it’s just some lady telling you what to do...?

I hadn’t even started making the chocolates yet, and already I was beginning to have second thoughts.

According to the internet, the chocolate-making process was fairly simple. First you broke chocolate into little pieces, then you melted those pieces, and then you reshaped them using a mold. Pretty foolproof, right? Wrong. Problem was, it was sort of like constructing the foundation of a house; the final steps were the most critical. That was the part I had absolutely zero confidence in.

Quietly I cursed my own laziness. Anytime there wasn’t food to eat, I simply chose not to eat. Plus, I never really paid attention in Home Ec. All in all, I was a total cooking noob. Still, I wanted to experiment and play around with a few ideas; after all, this was possibly my only chance to do so.

As I worked, I kept my phone handy so I could refer back to the recipe. I put the chocolate onto the cutting board and chopped it up. Then I put it in a bowl and melted it over a pot of boiling water. So far, these steps were identical to the Valentine’s Day scenes in all the shoujo manga I’d ever read. In manga, the girl usually sucked at baking. However, she was inevitably head over heels for some guy, so despite all her frustration she gave it her best effort nonetheless, and the end result was a finished batch of (ugly-looking) chocolates. At least, that was how the story usually went as far as I remembered. As for me, well... No, I couldn’t relate. I wasn’t...you know...*in love* with Shimamura. Nope, not possible. So yeah, obviously, this was just...chocolate. Just chocolate, plain and simple.

Considering my lack of skill and experience, I needed to pay attention to making the chocolates, or else my end result would look like total garbage. Shaking the stray thoughts from my mind, I focused on keeping my clumsy hands moving.

Supposing—and, for the record, this was completely hypothetical, since I was nowhere near good enough to actually

make it happen, but anyway—supposing I crafted professional-quality chocolates, would Shimamura get excited and say, “You’re amazing, Adachi!” and give me a hug? No, she wouldn’t. In what situation would she ever react that way? That version of Shimamura existed solely in my mind—and, frankly, I couldn’t let her stay there. Otherwise, the second I let my guard down, she’d tumble out of my mouth and expose me for the freak I truly was. I’d embarrassed myself quite frequently as of late, so I didn’t need her help. What I needed was to get my act together.

“That’s close enough, right?” I stared down at the bowl of chocolate as I stirred it with my rubber spatula, feeling validated by its color and fragrance. This was quite possibly the first time I’d ever (seemingly?) succeeded in creating something on my own. *Now I just need to put it in the fridge for a while, right?* I decided to Google it. The results: something about tempering.

Oh, right. I forgot I bought the powder for that. Pour it in, put in the rest of the chocolate, let it cool, stir it... Wait, what? Check the temperature? But I don’t have a thermometer... Meh, forget it. It’s not like anyone else is going to eat this anyway.

Once I finished stirring the chocolate, I poured it into the molds. Then, right before I popped it into the fridge, I grabbed my phone and snapped a couple pics just for fun. Not that this chocolate was my magnum opus or anything, but it was still my first time...cooking...all by myself. I decided to take one more photo, just to be safe. When I reviewed my shots, though, I noticed that the only real difference between them was the angle—no improvement in composition. *These look kinda stupid*, I thought, my enthusiasm cooling rapidly.

So, what would make the photos a little more entertaining? The answer, of course, was Shimamura. I decided I’d email them to her, followed by a brief message: “*What do you think?*”

I was actually kind of excited to see what her response would be, so I waited.

Ten minutes.

I sat, vibrating in my chair.

Twenty minutes.

I pressed my forehead against the table.

Thirty minutes.

No response. I took a deep breath and concluded that I should've expected this. If *I* was on the receiving end of those photos, I wouldn't have known what to say, either.

Minutes ticked by as my overeager brain cooled off with the chocolate. As penance for my idiocy, I sat on the floor in the corner of the kitchen, my knees tucked up to my chin. In the middle of winter, you'd have thought that the linoleum would be freezing cold. But if it was, I couldn't feel that through the heat flaring up periodically in my face.

I retrieved the fruits of my labor, which had long since hardened by this point.

"Uhhh..."

Thinking about it, all I'd really done was melt the chocolate down and reshape it. I hadn't added any icing or decorations, nor did I have any on hand, so there was nothing more I could do to improve what I'd made. You could tell how much of an amateur I was based on my total lack of creativity. When it came to making chocolates, my brain had decided that chocolate was the only ingredient I needed.

I decided to try one. *Yep, that's chocolate, all right.* Except it was somehow even *less* palatable than grocery-store chocolate. The end result, as predicted, was ugly, bad-tasting chocolates. The added ingredient of love had brought about no miraculous chemical reaction. It just didn't work that way in real life.

Even if I practiced chocolate-making every day until the fourteenth, I had zero confidence that I could produce something better in time for Valentine's. Nor did I want my parents watching. Maybe I could've talked myself into it if I had my own apartment, but alas.

In the end, I concluded that I'd be better off just giving Shimamura store-bought chocolates. Sure, maybe it was the "boring" option. But in my view, if I wanted a professional-quality gift that she was sure to actually enjoy, I'd have to set my "creative expression" aside and get it from a professional-quality manufacturer. Yes, it was a predictable choice, but when it came down to it, taste mattered. And my chocolates tasted terrible.

With that decided, my next move would be to find a highly-rated chocolatier and buy something. If I bought the gift online, I wasn't confident that it would arrive at my house before the fourteenth, so my best bet would be to visit a brick-and-mortar store in the Nagoya area and buy it in person. I could take Shimamura with me. *No, maybe I should go by myself.* After all, she implied that she wanted her gift to be a surprise.

"Well, this was a bust."

Today was my last day off before Valentine's. Starting tomorrow, I'd be stuck at school all the way to Friday. Granted, I only needed to take one train to Nagoya, but getting there and back would use up a decent chunk of time. Plus, I'd need to factor in time to browse the stores and decide...which meant that, if I was smart, I would've gone today.

I should never have wasted my day off screwing around like this. Now what? Skip school to go to Nagoya? Wait... Maybe it'd be more casual to buy chocolate on the day of, and give it to Shimamura right then and there? Yes? No?

Unfortunately, despite all my contemplation, I hadn't answered the question of what I'd do with the rest of my chocolate mountain.

Looks like I've got another week of choco-lunches ahead of me.

No horoscope could ever be 100 percent accurate. Otherwise, it'd be a prophecy. I, for one, didn't have such lofty expectations. Rather, I was more interested in seeing just how much of the horoscope came true each day. So far, the results were about fifty-fifty. Granted, 50 percent accuracy was still pretty amazing for a horoscope, but it'd be far too hasty to conclude my study with such a small sample size. Thus, I decided to watch tonight's episode, too.

However, Shaman So-and-So did *not* make an appearance. I'd assumed she was a regular part of the show, but maybe not. Instead, the opening three-ish minutes were filled by some other person giving a monologue, though it didn't sound rehearsed. Did they film these episodes live or something?

I sat cross-legged in front of the TV, waiting to discover my horoscope for tomorrow. Shimamura's was, "A surprise encounter will make your heart race!" and mine was, "You only live once, so tell them what's really on your mind!"

Never mind the fact that the screen faded to black as if the TV was consuming the presenter—I was too distracted by my horoscope. *Tell them what's really on my mind... What's really on my mind...* As I imagined myself actually doing that, my heart raced like a dozen red roses had bloomed in perfect sync all around me. When I imagined Shimamura's response, my face flushed beet red.

I scratched my knee through my pajamas, though I couldn't tell which part of my body actually itched.

In the back of my mind, I felt my rational side—or perhaps the version of me that existed before Shimamura—silently judge me for my pathetic fantasies. After all, I was no longer anything like the person I used to be.

Well, maybe that wasn't quite true. I was still bad at social interaction, still distant with my family—still as bland as ever. But when it came to Shimamura, another version of me rose to the surface and took over. She was restless, fidgety, and a total screw-up. It was painful to watch; still, I couldn't bring myself to resent her for it. In a way, it was kind of precious.

Anyway, back to the horoscope show—the clue was "O." Considering all the other letters, I tried to find a connection that tied them back to Valentine's Day, but ultimately couldn't think of anything. Maybe there was no deeper meaning behind them at all. The "special prize" was probably just some random junk anyway, so I decided to stop keeping track. Instead, I crawled under my blanket and agonized for hours and hours over telling Shimamura what was really on my mind.

Naturally, there was a lot I wanted to say. A lot.

Yet life was full of walls, thick and impenetrable, dividing us—and it would take more than courage to get my message across.

~Monday, February 10~

After I met Shimamura, my life changed for the better. That

much was simple fact, or so I chose to believe. At the very least, I became a more optimistic person (maybe a little *too* optimistic, if we're being honest) and my days felt a bit brighter.

Shimamura was my sunshine.

Ugh. Cringe.

Still, when it came to surviving on this sad earth, it was fairly important to have some small ray of hope to live for. At the very least, if Shimamura made me happy in some form or another, then what more could I really ask?

These were the thoughts that had kept me up last night.

Get too close to the sun, and it burns and blinds; no matter how hard you try, you can never truly reach it. Nevertheless, all the creatures who walk this earth still seek its warmth.

Personally, I was glad I finally found the light...and I wanted to take a moment to thank Shimamura for everything she'd done for me. That was what was "on my mind."

No, really... It's not a copout, I swear.

Sleep-deprived, I waited at the classroom door for Shimamura to arrive. Naturally, today of all days, she just *had* to be running late. Not that she was usually early, mind you—quite the opposite, really—but every minute she failed to arrive was another minute spent on the receiving end of countless weird looks from my classmates. Fortunately, all I had to do was meet their gaze, and they shrank back. For once, the "delinquent" label actually worked in my favor. Sadly, this didn't stop *certain people* —namely, Hino and Nagafuji—from striking up a conversation.

"Whatcha doin', Ada-chee?"

"What are you after, Chee-chee?"

Not sure I appreciate the accusation in your tone, Nagafuji . Nor was I crazy about these goofy, impromptu nicknames. Since I didn't have an answer for the pair, all I could do was hang my head and hope like hell they let it go.

Unfortunately, they didn't.

"Oh, I get it. Waiting for Shimamura?"

"Ah, yes, of course."

My cheeks flushed pink as they (and by “they,” I mean probably just Hino) saw right through me. *Is it really that obvious...? Yeah, probably.* As I silently regretted all my cringey antics over the past few weeks, Hino and Nagafuji headed off to their desks.

Honestly, Shimamura was a saint for putting up with a total weirdo like me. Or maybe she simply didn’t care one way or the other. The thought made me sad.

As I waited and waited, Shimamura finally turned up right before the bell rang. She saw me standing by the door and stopped, tilting her head in confusion. “What’s up, Adachi?”

For once, she actually looked wide awake. No yawning, no glazed eyes. As for me, my throat was bone dry. Nevertheless, I wanted to put my best foot forward.

“Good...good morning!”

I tried to keep my tone as cheerful as possible, but instead, my voice cracked. A cold sweat trickled down my back. My skin felt uncomfortably taut around my cheekbones.

“Morning... Did you need something?”

“I just...wanted to talk about...sunshine...”

“What?” Shimamura furrowed her brow as if to say, “What the hell are you talking about?”

Good question.

If I actually said what I was thinking, I’d only humiliate myself, and Shimamura was guaranteed to get embarrassed, too. I needed to cut the poetry and just stick to the point. *Now, how do I express gratitude again? Uhhh...oh, right!*

“Th-thank...you...”

My mind was too distracted by all the sweating, and I was drawing a blank. As a result, I’d skipped all the leadup and gone straight to the “thanks” at the end.

“Aww, you don’t have to thank me. It’s...” Shimamura got about halfway through her response before the weirdness sank in. “Wait, what?”

She stared at me, puzzled. I needed to keep my wits about me, lest I started foaming at the mouth.

“Anyway, that’s all!”

I hadn’t even bothered to explain, yet I was already beating an awkward retreat back to my desk like the coward I was. The way the corners of my eyes burned, you’d have thought I was in the middle of a nice, hot shower. Meanwhile, weird panting sounds escaped my traitorous lips.

“Huh? What was that about?” Shimamura murmured, and my ears burned to match my eyes.

I wanted nothing more than to turn back and explain myself, but I knew for a fact that if I caved, that would only make things a hundred times worse. Instead, I had to grit my teeth and endure the situation—sit down, face forward, and put my chin in my hands. I pressed my palms hard against my cheeks, willing them to stop twitching and lie flat. I tried to convince myself that I’d successfully told Shimamura what was on my mind, but sadly that just wasn’t possible.

Thinking about it—the way I tripped over my own tongue, refused to make eye contact, and constantly rotated through moods like a kaleidoscope—I decided I wasn’t a more positive person; I was just a dumber person.

If I glanced back to look at Shimamura, I was sure that’d be written all over her face. So, instead, I turned a blind eye.

I had failed to follow the instructions from today’s horoscope, so that was on me. The memory of my awkward exit made me low-key want to die. *God, why do I exist?*

Defeated, I nevertheless plopped myself down in front of the TV. It was my nightly tradition now. Besides, I didn’t have any better ideas for how to approach Shimamura, so frankly I appreciated advice, no matter where it came from.

“Oh hey, the Shaman’s back.”

Out she popped, swinging her hair energetically. Partway through, however, she stopped to explain that she couldn’t do her dance yesterday due to a migraine. *I didn’t need that information, but*

okay. Then, she immediately went back to headbanging *twice* as hard, like she was trying to make up for lost time. *You ever think maybe this is what you get migraines from?* Her hair whipped all over the screen. *Ugh, please just get to the horoscopes already,* I groaned internally, stomping impatiently on the floor.

I'll cut to the chase; Libra's horoscope was, "An intimate moment with the prince of your dreams will have your pulse racing!"

Prince of my dreams? Can't imagine who that might be, I lied to myself as I fidgeted.

But by the time tonight's clue ("U," for the record) was onscreen, I'd already come to terms with reality.

Okay, but...Shimamura's a girl...and so am I... So, who's the prince? Is it one of us? Which one?

Going by personality, maybe Shimamura was the prince, since I wasn't very manly...or was I? No, of course not. I was a girl, after all. Well, then again, so was Shimamura—and she was a *lot* girlier than I was, now that I thought about it. Long, soft hair, clear skin... and she had a bit of mystery about her, too. In that case, maybe she was closer to a princess, if anything.

I didn't *want* her to be my prince, did I? No, surely not. Or was that a bad thing...? I started to get confused. My heart was thumping like crazy, and I hadn't even gotten to the intimate moment with my prince yet.

So, does that mean the horoscope's spot-on...? Or completely off?

~Tuesday, February 11~

"Anyway, would you wanna come?"

"To Nagafuji's house...?"

"Yeah."

It took me a minute to process the sheer absurdity of Shimamura inviting me to a house that wasn't hers. Behind her, Hino and Nagafuji stood with their hands on their hips, looking smug. Apparently, they wanted us to play video games together after school—at least, I assumed it was their idea.

“You know I’m not a huge gamer, right?”

We didn’t have any consoles at my house, nor had I ever gone to a friend’s place to play theirs. But, more than anything else, I just wasn’t sure Nagafuji and I were “friends” in the first place.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Shimamura conceded quickly. Evidently, she didn’t have her heart set on me tagging along. I hadn’t said no yet, but I dearly wanted to, so this came as a relief. *Wait a minute. If she goes without me...what if something makes her laugh, and I miss it?*

“Oh, uh, on second thought, actually, I don’t mind.” I nearly added “as long as you’re there,” but hastily choked it back down. *Can’t say that in front of the others—I’d better watch my mouth.*

“Perfect! That’s four!” Together, Hino and Nagafuji celebrated their full roster.

Meanwhile, Shimamura looked at me with concern—the classic “caring older sister” sort of look.

“You sure?” she pressed, almost as though she could read my mind.

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

Again, I nearly named my greatest motive: *as long as you’re there* .

Once the final bell rang, the four of us headed for Nagafuji’s house. We rode two to a bike—Nagafuji on Hino’s, and Shimamura on mine. No matter how many times I saw it, I would never get over how ridiculous Nagafuji looked clinging to tiny little Hino’s shoulders. In my case, I was taller than my passenger, so the pairing looked a lot more natural...probably.

Shimamura’s hands always felt so big and warm whenever I held them, and yet whenever she grasped my shoulders, they felt small and frail. Was that because I was in the supportive role for a change? The thought made me feel a bit proud...until a few moments later, when I realized how incredibly childish this was.

Wait a minute. “An intimate moment with my prince...” And now, Shimamura’s hands are on my shoulders.

Seconds later, Shimamura let out a panicked yelp as I lost control of my bike. “Waaagh!”

Sure enough, Nagafuji's house turned out to be a butcher shop, just as they'd all told me. A man—probably her dad—stood behind the counter out front. He took one look at his daughter and exclaimed, "I see you've brought the regular, the VIP, and a newcomer to boot!"

If "the regular" was Hino, and "the newcomer" was me, then that meant Shimamura was "the VIP." I looked at her.

"My mom always sends me here to buy stuff when she's feeling lazy," Shimamura explained vaguely. Evidently, her relationship with her mom was just as healthy as the one with her little sister.

Would there ever come a day when I would join their ranks?

We walked to the back of the store and entered the Nagafujis' living space; Hino strutted around like she owned the place as she set up the retro game console. There were only two controllers, so only two of us could play at a time.

Although part of me was disappointed that I didn't get teamed up with Shimamura, another part was willing to let it slide—*this time*. But if I didn't get paired up with her in next year's class arrangement... The thought was too bleak to even imagine.

The living room was furnished with a *kotatsu* table, which our dear, cold-sensitive Shimamura was all too eager to sit at. Nagafuji followed suit. Meanwhile, Hino retrieved what appeared to be her own personal floor cushion and carried it over to the TV.

The video game worked a lot like *The Game of Life*; you rolled the dice, then moved your piece until you made it to the goal. I rolled for my starting funds: 10 million yen. *What? Who the hell gave me 10 million yen and pushed me out the door? That's beyond generous—that's downright insane. How many hours would I have to work at my current job to make 10 million?*

As I did the mental math, I rolled the dice again, and my result popped up onscreen: six.

"Wow, you're off to a really good start!" Shimamura commented, sitting with her legs buried all the way under the blanket and her cheek squished against the table. It was...really cute, actually.



Nagafuji was similarly collapsed on the other end of the table, facing Shimamura.

“You’re gonna flatten your boobies if you keep that up,” Hino remarked.

This got a rare scowl out of Nagafuji...for a few seconds, anyway, and then the expression petered out with the rest of her energy. Without moving, she fumbled lethargically for the controller. I glanced over at Shimamura and saw her doing the same thing. She looked so young and innocent; I decided to let it slide.

“Nnnn...”

Every blue square I stopped on, I got another million. The inflation rate was so ridiculous, I started to wonder if we were playing with Zimbabwean currency instead of yen. But no one else seemed all that surprised by this element, so apparently it was par for the course. The longer I played the game, the more I lost my grip on the value of money.

The “finish line” was set in Niigata, not that far from Tokyo. After just three more dice rolls, the station was already within my sights. *I’m supposed to land directly on it, right?* I started rolling more judiciously. Hoping for a four, I watched the animation onscreen.

“Ooh, a perfect roll.”

“Looks like you’re first, Ada-chee!” Hino teased, elbowing me in the ribs.

So, do I get anything for being first? Oh...money. Should’ve known. Is this a money-saving game? I wonder what the limit is.

“So far Adachi’s in first place, huh? Wow,” Shimamura commented without lifting her head, her cheek wiggling with her mouth movements. *Cutie.*

Unfortunately, I still didn’t have a good grasp of the rules, so being first didn’t mean much to me.

There was so much I didn’t know...didn’t understand...and, in my confusion, I missed my chance to feel joy. I lacked experience in general, and as a result, my end products were misshapen. That made me realize just how much I had yet to learn compared to the

people around me.

Thankfully, at around 7 P.M., we decided to call it a night. Hino seemed like she planned to stay, so Shimamura and I ended up leaving the house just the two of us. That came as a huge relief, albeit probably just to me.

I glanced back at the storefront window, dimly illuminated by the light spilling out from the back, and noticed a pillar nearby covered in all sorts of flyers—world cruises, political posters, even a mildly outdated movie poster depicting a princess guiding her prince by the hand.

I stared blankly at the poster, imagining our faces superimposed over theirs. Shimamura was the princess, pulling “me” along. But the characters’ genders weren’t a major factor to me—I simply found myself inserting Shimamura into the “leading” role, whatever it might be. With her there to guide me, I could go just about anywhere. *Ugh, I’m such a terminal case.*

Just then, the icy wind brought me back to my senses, but that was probably for the best. The next thing I knew, all the warmth had evaporated, leaving behind only the bone-chilling cold and the faintest outline of Shimamura, distinct from the hazy darkness all around us.

I knew she wouldn’t ask me, so I would have to offer. I walked my bike in front of her.

“Hey, um...want me to...take you home?”

Idly, I wondered if it would ever be possible for me to speak with confidence instead of cowardice.

“That’s pretty far out of your way... Are you sure?”

I nodded eagerly. After all, it was worth it if it meant I got to be with her.

“All right, then, I guess I’ll take you up on it.”

We set off in the same fashion we’d arrived, with Shimamura on the back of my bike. I felt her fingers tighten around my shoulders—and the next thing I knew, she leaned over my shoulder to look at me.

“You know, you’ve really changed a lot since we first met,” she murmured wistfully, her eyes wide in contemplation.

“Ugh, don’t remind me.”

Trust me, I’m aware. And for the record, it’s YOUR fault.

Once the Shaman’s dance was over, it was time for the horoscopes. That was the only part of the show I cared about.

I wasn’t sure if the Shaman’s dancing was actually relevant, but somehow it just felt fitting. *Wait, what? No, that’s stupid.*

“If you want to close that gap, then start taking action! Don’t be passive!”

Evidently, we Libras needed to be a bit more assertive tomorrow. It felt like the sort of tired cliché you’d read in a self-help book.

For the record, Shimamura’s horoscope was, “Don’t let others take advantage of your generosity.” Admittedly, she definitely had that sort of big-sister personality...but it struck me as the kind of horoscope you could find in any newspaper or magazine. Did the show have a whole different team of writers now or something?

Oh, and tonight’s clue was “G.” Apparently, tomorrow’s would be the last. But that meant nothing to me, since by this point, I couldn’t remember what the first clue was. I tucked my hands under my feet and curled up into a ball.

“Start taking action.” What a joke. If I were capable of that, then I wouldn’t have needed this stupid show. Besides, I wasn’t exactly sitting around twiddling my thumbs. I was trying my best, wasn’t I?

What I wanted to know wasn’t whether or not I should do something—it was *what* , exactly, I was supposed to be doing.

~Wednesday, February 12~

“She didn’t show...?”

All throughout the day, I kept periodically checking over my shoulder, but Shimamura’s desk remained empty. This was one of

few occasions when *I'd* showed up for class, but *she* hadn't. It gnawed and gnawed at me until I gave in and checked my phone.

At lunchtime, I'd sent her an email that read, "*You skipping today?*" but so far, she hadn't replied. She had seemed perfectly healthy yesterday...but maybe she came down with something at the last minute. I debated whether to go check on her. After all, she'd done the same for me a while back... Besides, I was supposed to "take action" today.

The problem was that Shimamura hadn't responded to my email, so I had no way of knowing whether she was actually at her house. Going there could very well be a waste of time. Or I might end up being forced to interact with her mom, which would be awkward.

Despite all my reservations, however, I'd already made up my mind, and now my body moved on autopilot. My footsteps were light and airy, and I could tell that my feet were eager to start pedaling.

Sure enough, my bike sailed smoothly all the way to the Shimamura residence. Once I confirmed that she still hadn't answered my email, I rang the doorbell. A few moments later, I heard the pitter-patter of feet running down the hallway—a bit too energetically to be Shimamura herself. *No offense.*

"Coming!"

The door flew open, and out popped a head of bright-blue hair, accompanied by a gust of spores that immediately engulfed me.

"Hello?" The girl tilted her head, smiling. "Oh, yes. You are Adachi-san, correct?"

"Yeah...?"

It was the little alien girl—I couldn't remember her name off the top of my head. Today she wore a sleeveless frock, as if she'd somehow forgotten that it was winter outside. What was she doing here? I peered over her head down the hallway, but no one else seemed to be coming.

"Where's Shimamura?"

"Napping! So, you must be very quiet! Shhhh!" She pressed

her index finger to her lips. *Uhhh, you're the one shouting about it.*

From “napping,” I figured Shimamura must not actually be sick. That was a relief. Evidently, she just felt like staying home today. Was this blue-haired girl an influential factor in that decision? I couldn't see the correlation.

“Actually, this is perfect,” the girl continued, then patted my leg. “You see, I must go and procure dinner.”

“Okay...?”

“Thus, I shall entrust her to you!”

She proceeded to dash out the door and down the street—completely barefoot, like a total lunatic. Dumbstruck, I watched her go. What was I supposed to do now? Watch over Shimamura? I didn't need someone else to ask me to do that. *Yikes, I sound like a stalker.*

“No...I'm not. I'm just...a loyal friend.”

“Now that I think about it, I can't have you answering the door,” Shimamura mumbled as she appeared at the end of the hall, rubbing her eyes. It was apparent that she'd just woken up from a nap.

Then her gaze met mine—and shifted from sleepy to sharp.

Likewise, I hastily shut my mouth and stood up straight.

“Oh, hey, it's Adachi.” She looked at me in mild surprise.

As I cast my gaze downward, Shimamura followed suit, untucking her shirt and looking at it. She was still dressed in her school uniform (minus the jacket), and now it was all wrinkled. She frowned, then shrugged and kept walking toward the door.

“Oh well,” she said. “Where's Yashiro?”

Should I point out the crazy bedhead she's got going on, or pretend I don't see it?

“She left,” I replied. “Said she had to go ‘procure dinner,’ whatever that means.”

“Oh, right. She's such a free spirit. So, what's up?” The look in Shimamura's eyes asked, “Did you need something?”

“Well, you didn't come to school today, so I thought maybe

you were sick. I sent you a message, you know,” I explained, though I heard a tiny bit of childish frustration creep into my tone.

She turned back and glanced in the direction of her room. “Oh, sorry. I left my phone in my bag, so I didn’t notice.”

Despite her apology, I couldn’t help but pout a tiny bit longer. Had she skipped school just so she could hang out with that little girl?

“Well, anyway, I came by to make sure you were doing okay. Sorry if I woke you.”

“Awww, you’re such a sweetheart!” she teased, grinning.

She reached for my head. I flinched a tiny fraction, but otherwise let her continue. First, I felt her fingers against my hair; then her big, warm palm cupped the back of my head. Why did her hands always feel so *big* when she petted me? As her fingers combed through my hair, my heart pounded so hard, it made my gums throb.

“Ack, sorry,” she said. “Force of habit.”

I sensed that she was about to pull her hand away. Thinking back to my horoscope, I took a step forward, closing the gap between us once more. With my head tilted toward the floor, I couldn’t see her reaction, but she didn’t say anything. I couldn’t speak, either—it took everything I had just to bite my lip and endure it. We froze in place for a moment...and then, silently, Shimamura resumed stroking my hair.

This, more than anything, was my real reason for coming here. Everything else had gone out the window, retroactively rewritten by this event. The chronology of it didn’t matter. Even if this wasn’t the reason I’d started with, I could just brute-force it later.

As the blood rushed to my head, I contemplated this moment’s significance. After all, if anyone else had stroked my hair, I’d probably have gotten annoyed at them messing it up. So, why was I okay with Shimamura doing it? And why did it provoke such a strong reaction from me? Why did time seem to stand still?

I had a feeling the answer could be summarized in just three words.

I'd come across this horoscope show entirely by chance, and now it was an integral part of my nightly routine. I couldn't speak to the show's accuracy, since I'd stopped thinking too hard about that after a few episodes. Yet I knew for a fact that it'd had a quantifiable effect on my day-to-day life. Perhaps a horoscope's "quality" was best evaluated based on how many readers actually acted on it.

That's not to say that this particular horoscope show was by any means *good*, mind you. Tonight's horoscopes, for example, all read, "Don't forget to buy chocolates!" That didn't really count as a horoscope at all, in my opinion, but at least they didn't bother playing coy about it. Immediately afterward, they started promoting this one chocolatier's website, and I was like, *Ah, yes, I see what you did there.*

Tonight's episode featured the final clue, which was "A." Then the Shaman revealed how she'd chosen the secret word herself. She went on and on (and on and on) about her decision process until some staff members ran out from backstage and attempted to haul her offscreen. There was a scuffle, during which the Shaman shouted things like "It's *my* show!" and "You wanna take this outside, punk?!" until eventually they overpowered her and, subsequently, she disappeared from sight. All that remained was her long wig, knocked to the floor during the struggle.

One of her costars retrieved it, smiling silently at the camera, and at that point I started to question what the hell I was watching. Thus, I turned off the TV before they ever revealed what the "special prize" was, although I heard them mention something about a "message." Personally, I couldn't remember the first few letters anymore, so I couldn't have called in even if I wanted to.

Either way, it was time to stop spending so much energy on this show. I had more important things to be worrying about, just as tonight's "horoscope" had "predicted."

~Thursday, February 13~

The next thing I knew, it was the day before Valentine's.

I could remember making chocolates on Sunday, and Shimamura stroking my hair, but everything before and between those was a blur. Possibly for the best, since I had the feeling that I'd humiliated myself a bunch...as usual.

Nah, I'm probably just paranoid.

The big day was now right around the corner. For once, the phrase "time flies" was actually applicable to my life; the clock that once ran agonizingly slowly now spun its hands at breakneck speed. It was so dizzying, I was scared I might just pass out.

Oh, and there was one other thing I forgot: I had to work tonight.

God, what do I do?

Standing near the restaurant's front entrance, I tugged the hem of my *cheongsam* and panicked internally. I still hadn't bought any chocolates for Shimamura; I'd planned to go tonight, right up until I realized I was scheduled to work. Fortunately, I managed to remember during class...but at the same time, I kind of wished I hadn't. So, there I stood, tying myself in knots, to the point that I actually forgot about how much leg I was showing.

Sometimes I sorely wished my stupid brain would at least *try* to keep up with what was going on.

The only option would be to wing it on the day of. Find a store, buy something, give it to Shimamura. Actually, maybe it couldn't hurt to bring her with me. *Yeah, that sounds good.* Better than an unceremonious five-minute exchange at school, anyway.

My biggest worry with this plan, however, was the possibility of long lines or stock shortages. I could tolerate standing in line, of course, but if they didn't have anything for me to buy, well...I'd be up the creek without a paddle. Could I give Shimamura something else instead? Surely it didn't *have* to be chocolate. Yeah... To me, the most important part of this holiday was simply giving her a gift—*any* gift. That allayed my fears a bit.

Right as I was on the cusp of solving one problem, another reared its head.

Did Shimamura *care* about our plans even remotely? She

hadn't forgotten them, had she? It occurred to me that I hadn't actually tried to arrange anything with her yet. Still, I couldn't exactly stand here and fiddle around on my cell phone in the middle of the dining hall. Fortunately, no customers were in sight, so I hurried to the staff room in the back.

There, my manager was nowhere to be seen. I peeked around and eventually saw her standing outside the side entrance; she, too, was on her phone. Without a moment to lose, I made a beeline to my bookbag, grabbed my phone, and composed an email at the speed of light:

“Are you free tomorrow would you want to go somewhere and hang out”

I knew I wouldn't be able to check for replies during my shift, so I punched in all my questions at once and hit send. Then I put my phone back and immediately walked out front. Luckily, there weren't any customers waiting, but I *did* spot my coworker's red car pulling into the staff parking lot.

I caught sight of the calendar near the front entrance and glanced up at the box for the fourteenth. There, printed in red, were the words “VALENTINE'S DAY,” denoting the holiday. And it was *tomorrow*. The thought made me restless, to the point that I felt my feet fidgeting.

Even if Shimamura couldn't hang out with me after school for whatever reason, it would be nice just to see her. We hadn't spent a holiday together since Christmas, and I was all kinds of excited and nervous. Or maybe I was just having a heart attack. Couldn't really tell.

To be clear, I wouldn't have felt this way about just anyone—only Shimamura.

So, why her? one part of my brain asked another.

What if I'd met *someone else* in the gym loft that day? Would I have started having feelings—er, normal friend feelings—for them instead? I let this scenario play out in my mind for a bit, but ultimately decided that the answer was no. We probably wouldn't have had much to talk about, and I would've made my exit at the first opportunity. From then on, I would've found somewhere else to sit around all day.

So, what made Shimamura so...comfortable to be around?

Maybe it was because she was my...my *soul mate* ...or something?

I hadn't actually spoken this out loud, yet I was so embarrassed, I nearly bit my tongue anyway. *Ugh, I sound like a creep!*

"Wow! You all red!" my older coworker teased in her thick accent as she walked in the door. The realization that I was blushing made my eyes burn.

"It...uh...it's from the cold. It happens a lot in winter."

"Very hot in here. Stupid thing!" she complained in the heater's direction as she pulled off her purple coat.

Oh. Apparently, it was warm in the restaurant. That would certainly explain my red-hot face. *Yeah...just the heater's fault.*

And so, the big day rolled around... The day that would decide it all.

Interlude: Yashiro Comes Calling Part 4

“I’M HERE for my chocolate.”

“What...?”

Yachi’s at our house yet again, except this time she’s acting like we owe her something. Me and my big sister are standing at the front door, staring at her like she’s cuckoo.

“I’m told it is a common custom at this time of year!” she insists, swinging her arms. Whoa... She’s so excited, her bright-blue fairy eyes are all sparkly. I almost expect them to start glowing or something. Like, literally. Because it’s Yachi.

“What are you even—*ohhhh* . You mean Valentine’s?”

“Yes, that,” Yachi says, nodding like a bobblehead. I can kinda tell she doesn’t actually know what “Valentine’s” is.

“Okay, well, Valentine’s Day is still a ways off. It’s closer to Setsubun right now.”

“Either one is fine,” Yachi shrugs with a smile. So, she doesn’t care about Valentine’s at all?!

Even my sister looks annoyed. “Someone just *had* to go and tell you about Valentine’s, huh? Well, let’s see... I think we have some chocolate in the fridge.”

She turns to go look, but then Yachi starts jumping up and down all excited, so she turns back and puts a hand on Yachi’s head to stop her.

“Calm thyself, child.”

“I *am* calm!” Yachi declares, straightening herself up to her full height. Satisfied, my sister heads to the kitchen.

But Yachi’s “calm” only lasts for maybe five seconds before I feel her big, round eyes on me, so I turn to look. Gosh, are her eyes pretty. Whenever I look at her—or she looks at me—my heart always starts racing.

"I'd like chocolate from you, too, Little."

"Say wha...?!"

She cups her hands and holds them out expectantly. She's so greedy! I stare down at them and think about it for a while. *Wow, even her nails are pale blue. Is that nail polish, or...?*

"Sure, I'll give you some chocolate," I say. "But you have to give me some back."

"Why is that?" Yachi asks, confused. I guess she thinks all this gift-giving is one-sided. Where'd she get *that* idea?

"That's how Valentine's Day works."

"Really?"

"I think so." I swing my arms.

She starts doing it, too—back and forth and back and forth. "In that case, let's have our gifts ready by the next time we meet."

"When's *that* gonna be?"

I don't even know where she lives or anything, so I have no way of finding her. She just sort of...appears. Maybe she really is a fairy.

Meanwhile, the strands of fairy hair wrapped around my finger continue to glow faintly blue. I like to look at them at nighttime when I'm in bed. Somehow, I can never tear my eyes away.

"God, it's freezing," my sister grumbles. She walks out from the kitchen carrying a box of chocolates she got as a souvenir last month.

She hates the cold more than anybody else in our whole family. Mom says it's because she's a wimp; I think so too.

"Here. I've got some leftover chocolate-covered macadamia nuts for you."

"Ooh, that sounds good!" Yachi lunges for the box, snatches it, and holds it over her head triumphantly, like a video-game character. "I will be sure to repay this gift sometime in the future!"

"Wait... You're going to take the whole box?"

"Yaaaay!"

Yachi toddles off at full speed without listening to a single word, cradling the box of chocolates like a priceless treasure.

“Good grief... Oh well. Only three or four were left in there, anyway.” My sister shivers and rubs her arms like she’s more worried about staying warm.

I guess I’ll need to get Yachi’s gift ready for next time.

“Man, everybody wants chocolate from me,” my sister mutters as we watch Yachi disappear into the distance.

“Who’s ‘everybody’?” I ask, confused.

She sighs and pats my head. “Do you want something, too?”

“If you’ve got extra candy lying around, I could take it off your hands.” I put my hands on my hips and chuckle smugly. “Heh.”

She jabs me in the stomach, and I start coughing instead. “Geh!”

~ Today's Adachi Forecast~

Out of nowhere, Shimamura asked to compare foot sizes with me. I was totally lost, but nevertheless, I took off my shoe and pressed the sole of my foot against hers. As it turned out, my foot was the smaller of the two.

Once Shimamura had her answer(?), she nodded to herself and walked off.

What the hell was that about...?

Chapter 3: Old Rose (Thorns of the Past)

~Wednesday, February 5~

EACH TIME I looked up at the blackboard to copy down my notes, I caught sight of the back of Adachi's head, swaying restlessly from side to side like a five-year-old's loose baby tooth. But since she'd been acting like this for a while now, perhaps in some sense she was actually a lot more stable than I gave her credit for. Plus, she managed to be more entertaining than the lecture we were sitting through.

After school, she asked me what kind of chocolate I liked. I hadn't anticipated this question, so it took me a minute. At first, I was tempted to respond with a joke answer, like "Oh, I only eat Godiva brand!" or something, but it was too risky. Knowing Adachi, she'd *literally* go out and buy me Godiva chocolate. So, instead, I gave her a safe answer: milk chocolate.

Looking back, she was probably trying to gauge my preferences so that she could buy me something I would enjoy eating. But by the time I realized I ought to ask her too, she was already gone. I didn't go after her—instead, I promised myself that I'd try to remember to ask tomorrow.

Still, it felt as if she was jumping the gun a tiny bit. To me, ten days was an eternity from now. Deep down, part of me wished my time could fly by as fast as hers apparently did.

Out of all the moments of my day, time always, *always* seemed to slow to a crawl during study time. It would feel like I'd sat there for hours; then I'd look up at the clock and realize that only thirty minutes had gone by. This would kill my concentration, leaving me with no other option but to take a break.

Maybe that was what ultimately led to the addition of a small TV up here in the second-floor study room. Without something to keep my sense of time firmly grounded, I'd only get bored and distracted and end up falling asleep half the time.

Not that staying up late was going to make me any smarter anyway.

Leaning forward onto the table and ignoring the chill I felt against my lower back, I stared at the TV screen and watched long strands of hair whip through the air. This particular show started off with some crazy dance.

"Oh, it's the Shaman."

I was familiar with her. Even when she guest-starred on other shows, nothing she said ever made any sense. After performing, she'd run offstage and out onto the street. That was her schtick. In these parts—by which I mean the Nagoya area—she was considered a local celebrity, so she always guested on regional shows. Fun fact: recently, she'd made a stink about some blue-haired kid she saw on the street who she was convinced was an alien.

Ridiculous, am I right? Who jumps to that conclusion? LMAO. Wait a minute... Why does that sound so familiar?

As the Shaman slowed to a stop, gasping for breath, her costars kept the show rolling in her place. A few minutes in, I realized it was a horoscope show. I didn't really care about astrology stuff, but I figured I might as well watch until my horoscope came up. Unfortunately, the horoscopes were listed by star sign. While I was pretty sure that I was an Aries or a Taurus, I wasn't 100 percent sure which.

The Aries horoscope was "Be wary of forgotten memories. Your lucky color is blue." Meanwhile, the one for Taurus was "Keep your eyes peeled, and you might witness something not intended for you!" As I attempted to decide which I liked better, the show continued. Once they started talking about some "special clue," I hit the power button on the remote.

As much as I enjoyed the Shaman's dancing, I didn't care about horoscopes, so I couldn't see myself watching it again.

Probably.

~Thursday, February 6~

I felt Adachi's gaze on me. Granted, that alone wasn't anything out of the ordinary...except we were in class, and she wasn't physically looking at me.

I don't know how you do it, but dayuum, girl.

For a while I wondered if I'd done something to provoke her, but I couldn't really think of anything. Yet she hadn't stopped staring at me ever since I arrived at my desk. In fact, at one point (before class started) she walked right up to me and stared at me point-blank. Clearly, *something* was going on; I just didn't have a clue *what* .

Adachi walked back over at lunchtime, so I decided to grab a bite with her. Prepackaged sandwiches for both of us.

Every now and then my mom packed a lunch for me—you know, whenever she could be bothered to lift a finger—but Adachi wasn't so lucky. However, I had a feeling that I knew the reason why. Whenever Adachi took a bite of something, I could tell from the way she chewed that she derived no joy from it. When I thought back to the conversation I'd had with Mrs. Adachi, I started to understand how miserable it might make her feel to watch her home-cooked meal steadily vanish into that emotionless abyss.

While Adachi had indeed acted strangely as of late, the fact remained that she was a human being with feelings. If she would only wear them more openly on her sleeve, maybe she and her mother could start to build something better.

That said, frankly, I had zero intention of trying to “fix” the Adachi family. If anything, I was more preoccupied with Adachi herself.

She kept staring at me, and since she didn't seem to want a bite of my lunch or a sip of my drink, I wasn't really sure what else I could do. Then, finally, she asked me something.

“Shimamura, what's your sign?”

It was an odd question, and I wasn't sure if it had anything to do with the way she was acting today. Since I didn't actually know the answer, I told her my birthday instead so she could tell me

which one I was. Unfortunately, her response to that was less than enthusiastic.

Then Hino and Nagafuji showed up to join the conversation. Instantly I saw Adachi's expression stiffen, though I wasn't about to comment on it. The look in her eyes was as hard as the bread in our store-bought sandwiches.

Whenever it was just the two of us, Adachi was willing to drop her guard and let me in. But the second anyone else tried to join us—even Hino or Nagafuji—her heart went on lockdown, hidden away behind an invisible force field. Emotion-wise, she was a total shut-in, and the only thing that drew her out of her shell was...*me*, apparently. Why did she trust me so much? It was a total mystery.

At this point, it literally felt as if Adachi was my sister. After all, my *actual* little sister was every bit as shy, except when she was with family. Or, who knew, maybe that was just my own preconceptions at work.

Either way, all this thinking made me a tiny bit curious, so I said, "Why did you ask about my sign, anyway? Are you into astrology or something?"

"Huh? Oh...uhhhh..." Adachi fell silent and averted her eyes.

I understood her asking about my birthday, but my zodiac sign? What good was that information? Did she want to check my horoscope or something?

That made me think back to the horoscope show from last night. Did she watch it too? *No, that can't be it*. Why on earth would anyone care about someone *else's* horoscope?

Then Nagafuji started babbling nonsense, and the next thing I knew, Adachi was back at her desk. End of conversation. All that remained was her distant gaze.

"Hmmm..."

After all that, I *still* didn't know what my star sign was.

It happened right after I got home from school and changed out of my uniform.

“Go pick up something from the butcher shop for dinner. You’re friends with their daughter, right?”

“What does our friendship have to do with anything?”

“Well, she might give you a discount, right?” my mother insisted, nudging my shoulder. Unlike her, I knew better than to expect any perks from a ditz like Nagafuji. Oh, well.

So, I was forced out of the house. I say “forced” because I knew if I didn’t go, we wouldn’t have food on the table tonight. That was what set the fateful chain of events into motion.

As I stepped outside with the bike key in hand, I promptly spotted my kid sister walking down the street on her way back from school. I waved at her; she noticed me taking the bike out from the garage and ran right up to me.

“I’m back!”

“Welcome home.”

She sniffled, her nose and cheeks flushed bright red like Anpanman’s. Then she held her arms straight out to block my path. “Are you leaving? Where are you going?”

“To buy dinner from the butcher shop. You wanna go instead?”

“No, that’s okay. Come home soon!”

With that, she walked straight past me and into the house. Part of me wished she hadn’t inherited my contempt for anything that required effort... Then again, I didn’t *actually* want her to go in my place, since there wasn’t much daylight left.

For a moment, I debated whether to go back inside and put on another coat. I was already straddling the bike by that point, so I decided not to bother. I zipped down the road, past all the elementary and junior high schoolers, and headed for Nagafuji’s Meats.

The bike made traveling a breeze, and I arrived in no time flat. When I walked in, Mr. Nagafuji stood at the counter, serving another customer. Naturally, he recognized me. “Hey there!” he called. I smiled politely.

The customer at the counter turned back to look at me, her

ash-brown hair swaying with her motions. She was about half a head taller than me, with cartilage piercings peeking out from under her long, soft curls. She was sloppily dressed in another school's uniform. A beat later, she turned back to the counter, and I positioned myself diagonally behind her to wait my turn.

Was she running an errand for her family, like I was? I wasn't expecting to see another teenage girl here. As I bent down and trailed my finger over the display window, pondering what to buy, the other girl suddenly whirled around to look at me, her eyes wide. This caught me off guard, and I flinched. *What? What do you want from me?*

"Shima-chan?" she asked incredulously.

That was my name, all right—and a rather affectionate nickname at that.

My sight went blurry, and my brain numbed as it struggled to process the situation. The only people who ever called me "Shima-chan" were friends from elementary school. Mentally, I compared the person in front of me to the roster of kids from my past.

Oh! "Tarumi?!"

"That's me." She grinned, pleased. Evidently, my guess was right on the money.

Back in elementary school, Tarumi was my best friend. To think I'd reunite with her *here*, in a butcher shop of all places... Not very chic, but okay.

Once I put in my order, I turned back to Tarumi. Never in my wildest dreams would I have guessed it was her. Then again, I'd heard rumors that she'd turned into a total delinquent. Maybe it was true.

"Shima-chan—wait, are we too old for nicknames now?" Tarumi asked. "Eh...probably not, right? Nicknames it is."

Seriously? You're going to call me by my grade-school nickname?

"Or would it be too weird...?" she asked after a pause.

Honestly, her lack of confidence was super relatable. I for one was glad to see that she wasn't the hard-ass rebel all the rumors made her out to be. I could rest easy knowing that she wasn't about to mug me.

“Okay, whatever,” she said. “You don’t mind if I call you Shima-chan, right?”

“Nah, it’s fine.”

This girl standing in front of me still didn’t fully match the Tarumi from my memories. It had only been three years since I last saw her—how could one person have changed so drastically? Now she looked nothing like she used to.

She stared at me intently, our faces just an arm’s length apart. It felt as though she saw straight through me, and I nearly took a step back purely on reflex.

“You’ve gotten really pretty, huh, Shima-chan?”

“Uhh...I wouldn’t know.”

What was I supposed to say to that? “Yeah, totally”? I’d sound like a complete narcissist.

“Here you go!” Mr. Nagafuji called as he brought Tarumi’s order to the counter. She took her meat parcel, nodded to him, then glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. Her considerable height advantage made her a bit intimidating.

“Well, see you around.” With a lazy wave, she bid me farewell.

“Oh... Yeah, see you,” I replied a beat later, raising my hand slightly in a tiny wave, like the faintest rustle of a leaf.

Staring down at my hand, I gingerly flexed my fingers and contemplated what, specifically, had given me pause. “Am I really going to see her again?”

Would fate be that generous?

Just then, Tarumi walked back into the store. Idly, I wondered if she’d left her wallet by mistake...or maybe she came back to order something else. Then she walked right up to me. Evidently, she had something more to say.

“Can I get your phone number while I’m at it?” she asked, playing with her hair.

That wasn’t something I expected her to ask me. “Oh, uh, sure. But, wait... I didn’t bring my phone.”

“Okay, then.”

Tarumi opened her bookbag and took out a pen and paper. Her notebook was so pristine and unmarked, it may as well have been brand new. She carefully tore out a small section from one page, then scrawled something onto it and handed it to me.

“Here’s my number.”

“Okay.” Oddly enough, I found I was impressed that she had her own phone number memorized; *I* sure didn’t.

“Call me when you get home.”

“Will do,” I nodded, pocketing the scrap of paper. Meanwhile, Tarumi hastily packed away her pen and notebook.

“Okay then...uhhh...yeah, see you around,” she repeated, more awkwardly this time. Once again, she seemed convinced that there would be a next time.

“Hmmm...”

As I hesitated, Mr. Nagafuji walked back to the counter. “Order up!” he called as he handed me my items wrapped in butcher paper. As I took them, I spotted someone staring at me from the back of the store.

“Oh, *now* you notice,” she said. “It’s freezing, you know.”

I squinted and realized it was Nagafuji, peering out from the back with half her body concealed behind a wall. She sidled along until she reached the front counter, where her father gave her a stern look that visibly said, “Go back to wherever you came from.”

“I saw the whole thing,” Nagafuji announced.

Yeah? You sure about that? Because I notice you’re not wearing your glasses.

“Did you have fun spying on me?”

“Not really.”

Didn’t think so. This had just been a chance re-encounter, anyway. “Tarumi—that girl just now—does she come here often?”

“I hardly ever work the front counter, so I wouldn’t know.”

“Yeah, because you’re an active liability to the business,” Mr. Nagafuji snorted.

She stared at him for a moment, then calmly turned back to

me. Idly, I wondered if anything ever actually got under Nagafuji's skin.

"Is Hino back there, too?"

"Curled up under the *kotatsu* ."

"Lucky her."

"Wanna come in for a bit?"

"Nah, I can't. I've got people waiting on me back home." Plus, I needed to somehow get this food back to my house without it going cold—in the middle of winter.

"Well, thanks for your business! See you tomorrow!" Nagafuji replied, possibly to spite her father's less-than-optimal evaluation of her work ethic.

With that, it was time for me to head home.

I paused briefly to glance in the direction Tarumi had vanished. Then, once I checked to make sure the scrap of paper with her phone number was tucked safely away, I started pedaling—slowly at first, then steadily faster and faster.

"That was a surprise," I muttered quietly, my breath leaving my lips in a white fog. But once I heard the statement out loud, I questioned whether I actually meant it. "Or maybe it wasn't."

With every word, I felt more cold air enter my body, freezing my heart from the inside out. I pressed my lips together to shut out the draft.

Night had fallen, and since it was the middle of winter, the only sound was my bike wheels spinning. No chirping crickets. Nothing to break the perfect silence.

As I ramped up my speed, I thought back to our final words to each other: *see you* . Would Tarumi and I actually see each other again? Did we *want* to? Maybe back then we had a reason to be friends, but what about now? Could we go from being "old friends" to just "friends again"?

Still, I had to admit, I liked the idea a lot more than the permanence of a final farewell.

When I got home, I took out my phone to call Tarumi and noticed that I had a new email in my inbox. Sender: Adachi.

“Do you like white chocolate?”

“Hmm...” I imagined the taste on my tongue. *“It’s pretty good.”* Send.”

With that out of the way, I proceeded to call Tarumi, just as promised. She answered immediately.

“Hello? Shima-chan?”

“Yep, it’s me. Shima-chan.” As it turned out, the cringey nickname was a lot more bearable over the phone. On the other end of the line, I heard the faint murmur of people in the background. “Are you still out and about?”

“Yeah, I’m at the grocery store now.”

“The grocery store?” I asked. It was a rather wholesome destination for a so-called delinquent. Or maybe “wholesome” wasn’t the right word. “Healthy,” I guess?

“Yeah, I’m grabbing some stuff. Say, would you wanna hang out sometime?”

This invitation was fairly sudden, all things considered. But she was an old friend, so I was willing to make concessions.

“Sure, sometime in the future.”

“Yeah, that works. Just sometime,” she replied, almost as if she was trying to convince herself more than me, and I didn’t really know what to say to that. Before I thought of anything, she continued, “There’s something I forgot I wanted to say earlier.”

“What’s up?”

I heard her take a deep breath, and then—“I’m really happy I got to see you again.”

My sight blurred and unfocused as my mind reeled.

“That’s all,” she added quietly. With that, she hung up.

“That’s all?” I repeated into the dial tone, but obviously it was too late. Tarumi was gone, and I didn’t have the answer, either.

I set my phone down, folded my arms, and noticed that my cheeks were burning. Speaking as a teenage girl, that kind of honest

sentimentality was enough to make me blush.

“It made her happy, huh?”

Evidently, Tarumi was ready to ditch the “old” part of “old friends.” But personally, I felt it was a little too soon. A little too... *easy* . Enough to give me pause.

Was friendship supposed to work like this? Or was our bond always that strong, and I just never realized? *No, that can't be it.* I'd been there. Surely I would've noticed.

“Hmmm...well...”

To be fair, hearing someone say “I'm happy to see you” was... you know...not the worst thing in the world.

In fact, it was actually...pretty okay.

~Friday, February 7~

At lunch, I noticed that Adachi had actually brought something from home for a change. Originally, I thought maybe she'd packed a sandwich. At that point, I figured we could eat together, so I headed over to her. She sat at her desk, chewing silently as she stared downward. At first, she didn't notice me, so I walked between her and the desk in front of hers.

“Whoa!” I exclaimed.

At that, Adachi finally looked up.

Spread out on her desk was a cascade of store-bought chocolate of all different brands, spilling out of a plastic to-go bag. No sandwich or anything. Just chocolate.

“Himamurhh?” she asked, her mouth full. Then, a split second later, she snapped back to her senses and stuffed all the chocolate back into the bag. Admittedly, my reaction to her lunch was a little scandalized, but surely she didn't need to hide it.

That said, I hadn't realized she was such a chocoholic. For that matter, what was going on with her hair? *Pony alert! Open the stables!*

“Oh, I get it. You used too much brainpower during class, so now you're filling up on sugar?”

“Uh...yeah...something like that,” Adachi replied instantly—so fast, I wasn’t sure she’d actually listened to a word I said. As she rested her chin in her hands, I noticed a bottle of mineral water on her desk. This came as a relief. *Now, that’s the Adachi I know.*

This ponytail look, however, was an Adachi I *didn’t* know. As her head swayed from side to side, so too did her hair, attracting—no, *demanding*—my attention. Naturally, it worked. How could I not notice when it kept bouncing around in my line of sight during class?

So, what had made her change her hairstyle? Was she trying to reinvent herself? Her exposed ears trembled slightly.

“You know, I heard that excessive chocolate consumption can give you a nosebleed,” I commented casually. “Not sure if it’s actually true, though.”

Reflexively, she reached up and touched her nose. Then she wiped it with her sleeve, and once she confirmed that she wasn’t bleeding, she looked back at me. I wasn’t sure what she was expecting. After a moment of extended eye contact, she averted her gaze and started to unwrap another chocolate bar. *Whew* .

As I watched her break off each piece of chocolate one by one and pop them into her mouth, it made me want a taste. “Gimme a piece.”

She handed me the whole thing. I accepted it, then flipped it over and compared its calorie count with that of my croquette sandwich. *I knew I shouldn’t have bought this thing* . The numbers were in the triple digits. I started to sweat.

Meanwhile, Adachi carried on eating her chocolate like she’d never even *heard* of calories. As I glanced around at the various wrappers, I realized what they had in common: they were all milk chocolate.

Milk chocolate... Feels like we had a conversation about that recently.

Could Adachi’s new all-chocolate diet possibly be my fault? Was the ponytail a symbol of her determination to commit to this lifestyle choice? If so, I really wasn’t sure what to tell her, other than, *Chill. You’re acting like the main character in a shoujo manga.*

Meanwhile, she continued to eat her chocolate in silence, occasionally stopping to shake her head or manually adjust her ponytail's position—in other words, she was restless from the neck up. Did she want me to comment on the hairstyle or something? Personally, I didn't have much of an opinion either way, so I hoped to avoid a conversation about her fidgeting. *Oh well.*

Once I finished eating my chocolate bar, I rose to my feet, reached out with one hand, and lightly clasped the tip of her ponytail. "This is cute," I offered, feeling guilty that I didn't have anything more creative to say.

She turned to look at me and froze. "Huh?"

I thought back to her usual hairstyle and added, "But, then again, your hair's always cute."

There was something soothing about the familiar, as opposed to the new. *Actually, now that I think about it, what am I going to do with MY hair?* I picked at my bangs and contemplated this decision. Adachi started to say something, but the words wouldn't come—she simply opened and closed her mouth like a goldfish. Her forehead and ears were bright red. Was she drunk or something?

"What's wrong?"

The instant I asked, Adachi leapt to her feet and dashed out of the classroom like a bat out of hell.

"Hey, wait! The bell's—!"

—going to ring soon... Plus, you left your chocolate all over your desk.

When she finally returned, the look on her face suggested that she was dead inside, so I kept an eye on her during our next class. I could tell just from looking at the back of her head that her mind was elsewhere. Fortunately, she showed no sign of developing a nosebleed.

Either that was just an old wives' tale, or she simply hadn't consumed all that much chocolate.

~Saturday, February 8~

I heard some sort of commotion outside my room, so I

wandered to the living room to investigate. There, I found that Yashiro had come over to play with my sister. The two of them were goofing off, roughhousing and running circles around each other; each movement kicked up blue sparkles like technicolor dust.

Meanwhile, my mother watched them from the hallway. “That’s some wild hair,” she commented under her breath before disappearing back into the kitchen. *Really, Mom? That’s all you have to say?*

“I’m bored,” Yashiro announced.

“Me too,” my sister agreed.

To me, it seemed like they were having fun—they lay in a heap on the floor in a perfect X-shape. I didn’t want to interrupt their playtime, but before I could sneak away, Yashiro spotted me.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Shimamura-san. Well, well, well.”

Yes, yes, I heard you the first time.

She wriggled out from under my sister and came slithering in my direction like a snake. In place of her space suit, she wore a green sweater and jeans. However, the look was a bit too tomboyish for her, and she didn’t pull it off well. If anything, it felt like she was trying to imitate someone else’s style. In a way, the sweater and jeans were more “alien” than the space suit ever was.

“Let’s go see a movie,” she suggested.

“What—”

“—a good idea!” my sister finished for me as she crawled over to us on her hands and knees.

“You see, I wish to observe this ‘movie’ phenomenon.”

“I wanna go, too!” my sister volunteered, raising her hand gleefully.

They were already excited about this prospect, but I had yet to agree to it. I paused to think for a moment, gazing out the window. *How can it still be so cold when the sun’s out? Ugh, I have a runny nose again.*

“Feel free to go by yourselves,” I said. “Believe it or not, I’ve got a lot of studying to—”

“Just go with them,” my mother called as she passed the door,

like an extra in the background. “And feed them lunch while you’re at it.”

“Oh, I get it. You just don’t want to have to cook,” I replied.

“You better believe it,” she shot back. With that, she disappeared again, carrying a bag of Mochikichi fried rice crackers—probably planning to get back in bed and watch TV. Incidentally, that was also *my* plan.

Meanwhile, Yashiro hopped to her feet and attempted to drag me off. “Now then, let’s be going, Shimamura-san!”

“Don’t pull on my clothes, you moron! Are you trying to strip them off?!”

I put a hand to her forehead and pushed her away. I was willing to pay for one little mooch, but certainly not two.

I know you love animals, sis, but please stop bringing this creature into our home.

“Fiiiine...I’ll go with you,” I said. “Just give me a minute so I can get dressed.”

“Shall I assist you?”

“Absolutely not, thanks!”

Once I successfully peeled Yashiro off, I returned to my room. I’d spent the whole morning lying in bed, so I still wore my pajamas; that was how I normally spent each winter. As I folded up my futon, I silently cursed myself for ever deciding to leave the room.

After I got dressed, I took the two to the local shopping mall—the same one I visited with Adachi the other day. Out here in the sticks, there weren’t exactly a lot of options to choose from. Sure, we could make the trek to the theater downtown, but with half the shops closed, we’d have a hell of a time trying to find a place to eat.

Yashiro took my hand (well, more accurately, my fingers) and squeezed tight, looking pleased as punch as she pulled me along.

“Hmmm...”

Why did everyone want so badly to hold hands with me? Did it make them feel secure? Or were they afraid I might fade away entirely unless they kept me tethered to something?

As we walked, I felt my sister's gaze on my free hand, so I held it out to her. "Do you want to hold hands too?"

"Pssh! I'm not a little baby!" She turned away from me sulkily.

In the past she'd held hands with me anytime we were in public, but okay. I retracted my hand, and we kept walking.

"Put your hand out again," she demanded after a moment.

She was being a brat, so I pinched her cheek while I was at it. This time she reached out and put her hand in mine; after a beat, I tapped the back of her hand with my index finger.

"What?!" she snapped.

"Nothing," I grinned, ignoring her little red face.

Now I had both hands full; hopefully Adachi wouldn't show up, or else I'd have to grow a third arm. Then again, knowing her, if she witnessed me in this position, her reaction would probably be a little more...you know...on the weird side.

"Now we just need Little to hold my other hand," Yashiro suggested, reaching across me toward my sister.

"What, so we can spin around in a circle? Not happening."

Pulling her arm, I made Yashiro face forward. When had she gotten to be such good buddies with my sister, anyway?

The movie theater was on the second floor. On our way to the escalator, I smelled a sugary fragrance wafting from somewhere; I turned back to our smiling alien. "So, is there any particular movie you want to see?" I asked, knowing it was entirely possible that she hadn't thought that far at all.

She froze, eyes wide, like I'd grown a second head. "I thought we were...going to see it?"

"I mean, there's more than one movie in the world. You have to...pick one..." My voice faltered as I realized she wasn't going to understand.

Yashiro's eyes darted all over the place until, finally, she looked back at me with a smug smirk. "Ah, I see. So, there are different breeds of movie! Another mystery solved, all thanks to me. Heh heh heh..."

"Riiight..."

She didn't seem to be putting on an act, either. Maybe she really was just that ignorant. *Geez, girl. You are one of many, many things beyond the scope of my mortal understanding.*

"Well, well, if it isn't a young mother hen and her two chicks!" someone within earshot commented.

You've sure got me pegged, I thought as I turned in their direction.

It was Hino—or perhaps I should say, *I realized belatedly* that it was Hino, because at first I honestly wasn't sure. If it wasn't for her sunburn, I might never have put two and two together.

She stood on the escalator, staring down at us; her hairstyle was the same as usual, but her clothes were *very* different. By that, I mean she was decked out in a kimono. Not a cheap yukata, either—a traditional layered red kimono. After I recovered from slack-jawed shock, I remembered hearing that she wore formal Japanese attire whenever she was at home. I didn't know the details behind it or anything—just that she was allegedly from that type of traditional family. The type that serves chickpeas and kelp to children as a snack.

"Is that you, Hino-san?" asked Yashiro.

"Is she your friend, Neechan?" asked my sister.

"Yes and yes!" Hino replied, with a double thumbs-up.

Given her short stature, dark tan, and ostentatious getup, I couldn't help but think of Girls' Day, Shichi-Go-San, and all those other traditional Japanese holidays. Hino stuck out like a sore thumb, as if she was a cosplayer outside a convention center. As much as she liked to claim she was a magnet for weirdos, today she was the weirdo.

"Hold on a sec!"

She turned and came back down the up escalator—an act so dangerous, not even a child would dare try it—until she reached the ground floor. *Dang, she's gutsy. I could never do that. Well, maybe I could try going up a down escalator.*

"Wait, is this your little sister? Have we met before, kiddo?" Hino asked as she smoothed her kimono.

Good question. Have they?

"I don't...think so...?" my sister replied as she retreated behind me. Not a big fan of strangers, that one.

"I can't remember, either. Oh well! Now we have. As for you, Miss Alien, you don't look very alien today," Hino continued, commenting on Yashiro's choice of outfit.

Not sure space suits are very "alien," either.

"Keh heh heh! This is my undercover disguise," Yashiro explained proudly. Too bad her "cover" was entirely blown by her...you know...bright-blue hair. In fact, she and Hino were both so disproportionately conspicuous, they made me and my sister look somehow "out of place" for wearing normal clothes.

"So, are you having a fun little family outing with your two charges?"

"Kind of. This one's not family, though," I replied, ruffling Yashiro's hair. She flailed and jumped away, scattering sparkles everywhere. "What about you?"

Hino followed my gaze to her kimono and pinched a bit of fabric. "Oh, I just didn't want to have to change back into this thing when I got home, so I kept it on. Too much effort, y'know?"

In my opinion, it would take *more* effort just to walk around in all that, since you'd have to try not to step on the hem or get the sleeves dirty. To be fair, Hino looked as if she had it under control, but still. Definitely not loungewear. And another thing—had she biked here in that? Riding a bike in a kimono was a guaranteed recipe for disaster. What if the fabric caught in the wheels and you fell over?

"Are you running errands, then?" I asked.

"Nah, I just wanted to pick up some manga."

Oh, okay, so she's headed to the second-floor bookstore on the far side of the mall. "Where's Nagafuji?"

"We may hang out a lot, but not on weekends," Hino laughed, waving a hand dismissively. "She's got club activities or whatever."

"Right... Club activities..." I started to offer some vague platitude, like "She sure is working hard," but I choked it back down. "What club is she in, anyway?"

“No clue,” Hino replied without batting a lash. I was surprised to discover that there were things about Nagafuji that Hino didn’t know.

I paused to imagine Nagafuji attending her club. Given her love of boomerangs, I could see her in some kind of boomerang-throwing club. Couldn’t imagine anyone else joining it, but hey.

“What I want to know is, why do you always ask me about Nagafuji whenever you see me, dear Shimmer?”

“Shimmer?”

“That’s your name.”

“You sure about that?”

“Yep!”

This conversation wasn’t making any sense to me. Probably because neither of us were actually using our brains.

“Well, all right then!” Hino declared, evidently growing bored of the gag. She was always the self-proclaimed “normal one,” and I wasn’t about to rain on her parade...but she could be so very odd at times.

Granted, everyone had the right to their own personal values. When this concept was taken to its logical extreme, though, didn’t that mean it was pointless to try at all to be considerate of other people? After all, you didn’t really *need* to try. After enough time in the other person’s company, you were bound to find at least one thing in common. Perhaps that coincidental congruence was the real reward of human connection.

“Anyway, Shimamura, where are you three headed now? The sauna?” Hino asked after she followed us onto the up escalator. I noticed that she’d immediately dropped the “Shimmer” thing.

“We are here to see a movie!” Yashiro answered, standing tall and proud for some inexplicable reason. *It’s not that impressive, you know.*

“Oh ho! A movie, eh? I, too, like to see a movie every now and then.” Hino carefully adjusted her posture. Whereas she’d been standing around aimlessly before, now she appeared to have a purpose in mind.

“Are you coming with us?” I asked.

“A movie does sound pretty great right about now.”

“What about your manga, though?”

“Oh, I don’t read that stuff. I’m a bookworm—I prefer novels.”

Says the girl who literally read a fishing manga just the other day. Still, in her long red kimono, Hino did have a sort of “novelist” vibe going on—you know, from the 1800s or something.

By the time we arrived at the second floor, my skin had adjusted to the temperature change, and now my sister’s hand was uncomfortably warm. Not Yashiro’s, though—hers still felt nice and cool. It was almost like I could physically *feel* her aqua-blue aesthetic.

“Uh-oh, Shimamura! It appears you’ll need a third hand so that you can hold mine,” Hino joked, smirking, as we walked.

Yeah, sure, I’ll just grow one for you. “You want to hold hands?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

“You can hold mine,” Yashiro offered.

How very...considerate? I guess?

“Why, your kindness warms my heart!” Hino exclaimed as she accepted. Then, three steps later, she let go again. “Meh, I’d rather walk at my own pace.”

Classic Hino. That was the sort of attitude Adachi used to have. When had that changed?

Meanwhile, my sister used me as a protective shield as she shot furtive glances at Hino—probably fascinated by her unusual attire. Then Hino noticed her peering and walked around me to get a look at her.

My sister started to hide, but stopped. Instead, she peered up timidly at Hino and asked point-blank, “Are you a princess?”

“Heh heh heh! Do I look like a princess? I suppose I do,” Hino smirked, waving her long sleeves around.

“Trust me, it’s just the clothes,” I snarked, rolling my eyes.

Her gaze panned from right to left. “You know, I had a dream that I was a princess.”

“What kind of dream?”

“Mmm...I don’t remember much, but in the end, I turned into a fungus,” Hino explained, as wistfully as if it had happened in real life. The dream’s details were so scarce, however, that I couldn’t see how this had anything to do with princesses at all.

“Was it a nightmare, or...?”

“Eh, I woke up afterward, so probably not.”

That was a rather generous evaluation. Most people would’ve rated a dream based on content, but apparently all Hino cared about was whether it ended.

“By the way, Hino-san, why are you grilled?” Yashiro asked, peering curiously at Hino’s tanned skin from up close. She meant “sunburnt,” but... *Eh, close enough, I guess. Kind of.* Hino’s skin was certainly well-browned, I suppose.

“Oh, it happened when I reentered the Earth’s atmosphere,” Hino lied.

Whoa there, buddy. You need to pick your audience for jokes like that.

“Hah! You Earthlings are such amateurs!” Yashiro scoffed smugly.

See, what’d I tell you? I knew she’d believe you. “Just so you know, she’s *joking*,” I warned my sister.

She scowled and pouted sulkily. “I know that. I’m not stupid.”

I know you’re not stupid, but at the same time, you still believe in Santa Claus ...so I can never be too careful.

“All right then, let’s show this alien what Earthlings can really do. Prepare to have your mind blown!” Hino declared, smirking, as if she’d made any movies herself. *Reminds me of the fable about the donkey in the lion’s skin... Okay, maybe not.*

We passed the 300-yen store, then the shoe store, then finally arrived at our destination. Out front, a big red sign read “*So-and-So Cinema*” in English for some reason. Inside, the lobby was dim and decked out in blue from top to bottom. I’d passed this place countless times, but believe it or not, this was my first time actually setting foot inside.

Naturally, the kiddos couldn't read the English sign, so their only reaction was "Whoaaaa!" I glanced around the interior—not too much, though, just casually. Apparently, this theater had twelve screens total.

"Do you know about threed, Little?" Yashiro whispered to my sister.

Threed? Like for fabric? Wait, no. The hell is threed? And what kind of nickname is "Little"? Don't you know what my sister's name is by now?

"No."

"It makes the stuff in the movie pop out, like, 'Zoom! Pow!'"

I realized Yashiro meant "3D." Was *that* why she wanted to see a movie? I saw her glancing furtively at the snack counter, but chose to ignore it.

Not only was the theater showing the latest releases, but with Valentine's Day right around the corner, they also had some old romance classics on the marquee. Hino gazed at the timetable for a moment.

"Oh, that's right!" She lit up suddenly. "I should buy chocolate on my way home."

At first, I wondered who it was for. Then I realized I didn't need to wonder. "For Nagafuji?"

"Yeah, but it's not really a gift. I'm just gonna buy some as a snack and share it with her. Same thing we do every year," Hino explained, waving both hands dismissively.

This yearly ritual piqued my interest. "Oh yeah? Why's that? Is it just tradition?"

"Because she likes chocolate, so it makes her happy?" Hino tilted her head slightly, as if she hadn't thought about it until now.

Her answer was immediate, with no hesitation—but not in a flippant sort of way. More like it was a gut reaction, casual and unpretentious. Point being, it was nothing like the awkward tension that hovered between me and Adachi.

"Is that all that matters?" I asked.

"No, of course not," Hino shrugged, but my mind's gears were

already turning. Perhaps Adachi and I had gotten too bogged down in the *formality* of it all.

“Well, either way, this isn’t the place to be having this conversation,” I said.

“Why’s that?”

Because little ants will smell sugar and come running.

“I heard ‘chocolate’!”

Told you so.

Yashiro beamed up at Hino; Hino reached down, grabbed her head with both hands, and—“Zzzt!”—gently redirected her to me. “Have this nice lady buy you some.”

But I already gave her some!

“Shimamura-saaaaan!”

“No begging!”

Yashiro tried to cling to me, but I pushed her away headfirst. In response, she pushed her face against my hand. *Little weirdo.*

A few minutes later, I gave in to the pleading and bought caramel corn from the snack counter. Apparently, Yashiro didn’t actually care if it was chocolate as long as it was sweet. While I was at it, I bought some for my sister, too. *I’m such a doormat.*

“All right, now listen up. You have to be quiet and watch the movie, okay? No shouting,” I explained as we took our seats in the theater before the show started.

Yashiro, however, was already engrossed in her popcorn. “Yeah, yeah,” she replied offhandedly.

As I looked at her hands, I thought of another thing to warn her about. “And no clapping, either.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“No, you need to take this seriously!” Hino of all people chimed in. Passionately.

“Ish fine, I won’d clab,” Yashiro replied through a mouthful of popcorn. The problem was, I couldn’t even trust her to follow the laws of *gravity*, much less society. My sister would probably be fine, though. I didn’t want to nag needlessly and piss her off again, so I

decided to have a little faith in her.

The movie we chose was set in space and, as Yashiro requested, 3D. It wasn't a horror movie, but it may as well have been; it was so gripping, I could scarcely breathe. It's hard to explain, but...it made me grateful for my body's physical weight in a way I normally never was.

After the movie ended, and we all walked out of the theater, Hino stopped and stared at me intensely—specifically, at my hands, which were once again joined with Yashiro's and my sister's.

"What?" I asked.

"You're a lot more sisterly than I thought."

"More than you, I guess," I replied with a shrug, lifting the kids' hands up.

Confused, Yashiro raised her other hand enthusiastically; in contrast, my sister grimaced bashfully.

"Don't you have siblings?" I asked Hino. "I forget."

"I have four older brothers, but some of them are a lot older than me and don't live at home anymore. So, we never talk."

It seemed like kind of a lazy excuse, so I figured she probably just didn't want to go into detail about them. Hino's family situation was just so...complicated. Or at least, it seemed that way. Not that I was ever actually going to find out.

"Anyway, all that stuff aside...this was a real treat!" she declared, putting one hand on her hip. Her smirk seemed to ask for my agreement, so I grinned and shrugged.

After that, Hino treated us all to lunch, something I appreciated greatly. Not in the financial sense—it was just a really sweet gesture.

All in all, it was a pretty okay day.

~Sunday, February 9~

After hours spent lying around in bed, I noticed that I hadn't heard any screaming, so evidently there were no visitors today. Not that I minded the occasional lively guest, but it was exhausting to

deal with day after day. I needed a lazy Sunday like this one to recover all the energy I expended.

Considering that I'd spent my morning reading a textbook, of all things, I was practically an honor student. My parents would be so impressed...you know, if they conveniently forgot about all the school I'd skipped before now.

In just two more months, I was going to be a second-year. That was the deadline before which I needed to catch up to the rest of my peers. I'd finally gained some ground over winter break, and with finals coming up, I couldn't afford to slow my pace. But the harder I pushed myself, the more I started to miss the gym loft.

As the winter melted away, and the first few rays of spring crept over the horizon, that loft would warm up once more...but would we ever go back there?

"Nahhh...probably not."

Given my studious behavior lately, I was pretty sure I'd chosen to leave the delinquent life behind. If I wanted to hang out with Adachi, there were plenty of better places to do it. Even if we decided to play ping-pong specifically, we had other options. There was no need to commit to one place in particular. That's why I wanted her to graduate to the next grade with me.

My cell phone started to ring from somewhere in my room. I rummaged for it amid my desk clutter, but couldn't find it. It only rang the one time, so it was probably just an email—but now that I'd lost my phone, I was compelled to keep looking. After I checked every conceivable spot, I stopped to think. When was the last time I remembered having it? I hadn't played with it all weekend, so maybe it was still in my bookbag. I looked, and sure enough, it was in the exact same spot I'd left it on Friday.

Pretty sad that I went the whole weekend without receiving any messages. Some social life I must have. I checked the email's sender, and unsurprisingly—though there had been one other possibility—it was Adachi. (The other possibility was that it was spam from my cell-phone provider.)

The email had no body text—just an image attachment. Curious, I opened it and saw...

"Chocolate...?"

Brown sludge, melted and poured into metal molds.

“Huh.”

Yep, that's chocolate, all right. So...what about it? With no further details, I didn't understand what exactly I was looking at.

Then another email arrived in my inbox—again from Adachi, again with an image attachment. And again, the image was of chocolate. She still hadn't sent a single word of explanation; if anything, I now had *more* questions. Was this her idea of a Valentine's Day gift? To save money or something? *No, couldn't be .*

I contemplated calling her to ask about it. On the other hand, it felt like that was what she *wanted* me to do, and I refused to give in. Meanwhile, *another* chocolate photo arrived, this one taken at a different angle. Was this some new form of bullying?

Spare me the inkblot test, okay? I'm not that smart to begin with. If only I could've seen Adachi's face right now. Maybe then I'd figure it out.

Her final email contained a message. “*What do you think?*”

Good question.

I got the distinct sense that I was going to have to put a lot of effort in if I wanted to escape Adachi's labyrinth. For a while, I ran up and down her illusory stairways and twisted purple hallways... but the further I ran, the fuzzier my mind became.

“Ugh.”

Too much effort.

~Monday, February 10~

“Oh, hey, it's Shima-chan!” someone called as I was on my way to school. Confused, I turned around, but couldn't immediately pinpoint who it was. I knew it couldn't be someone from my class, since she was running in the opposite direction. Rubbing my sleepy, Monday- morning eyes, I scrutinized her appearance. She looked as though she was the same age as me.

Oh, okay. I think I've got it.

“Hey, long time no see!”

She was one of my old friends from elementary school. Her name was...uhh... It was... *Oh no, I have no clue what her name is.* Panicking internally, I decided that my only option was to keep smiling.

Fortunately, my old friend didn't suspect a thing. She grinned and wheeled her bike back in my direction. Her hairstyle and clothing had changed completely from elementary—not to mention, she never used to wear makeup—so, appearance-wise, she was basically a completely different person. Weird how I somehow recognized her anyway.

“Whoa, your hair's a lot lighter these days!”

“Well, you know how it is. I'm getting on in years!” I joked, laughing amiably as I gave her a playful shove on the shoulder. “C'mon, don't make me sound like I'm eighty.”

“It doesn't really suit you, huh?”

Her blunt comment hit me point-blank, as if someone had dumped a bucket of paint over my head. *It doesn't?* I picked up a bleached strand and stared at it. Everyone seemed to share that opinion—even my own family—so maybe it would be best if I dyed it back to brown after all.

But if I did that, well...I'd have the same hair color as Adachi, you know? Then we wouldn't complement each other like we did now, and... *Wait, what am I thinking? Complement each other? From whose perspective? I'm not that far gone, am I?*

“So tell me, Shima-chan, are you still in touch with anyone?”

“Ummm...not really...”

“Gotcha. That makes sense.”

Makes sense how? It felt as though she was just saying things at random to keep the conversation going; I forced a smile. No matter how good an actress I was on the outside, however, I always felt uncomfortable talking to people from my past.

Maybe this conversation would've soared like a bird back in the day, but now it landed like a wet frog on pavement. They say persistence is key in many things, and as it turned out, relationships were one of those things. Without regular upkeep, a friendship could easily run dry.

“Oh yeah, so do you remember that one girl, Tarumi?”

“Tarumi? Yeah, totally,” I replied vaguely. Somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to admit that I’d bumped into her just the other day.

“I saw her a couple weekends ago at the train station. She’s soooo tall now!”

“Oh yeah? That’s cool.”

Come to think of it, Tarumi was pretty tall. And she had long legs. Personally, I was jealous on both accounts.

There was a long silence, as if she interpreted my response as uninterested. Then, to escape the awkwardness, we both waved goodbye, rescued by our teenage obligation to go to school.

“See you!”

“Later!”

And so, we parted ways. Neither of us said the word “goodbye,” yet I sensed that we would probably never see each other again. She’d only stopped me on the street because my presence was a rarity. If by some chance we ended up spotting each other every morning after this, we’d lose any reason we had to say hi. That was the sense I got, at least.

That was how “old friends” worked. Where once our clocks were perfectly in sync, now their hands pointed to different times. It would take effort and adjustment to line them up again.

As I passed the graveyard, I gazed at the headstones and spotted the name Tarumi. I traced the letters in the air with my finger—but really, she wasn’t that far beyond my reach. She’d been spotted at both the butcher shop *and* the train station; surely, she had to live around here somewhere.

What if I met up with her again? How would I feel?

Not that I really planned to go out of my way to hang out with her, but...after a moment of consideration, I decided I wouldn’t mind seeing her.

Truth be told, I could reliably trace the majority of my behavior back to those same three words: *I wouldn’t mind* . It was the place my heart always settled.

“That’s how it always is with me, I guess.”

Not that anything was wrong with that. Still, part of me hoped that someday I could graduate to “I’d like that” instead.

~Tuesday, February 11~

Someone once said that “humanity’s biggest flaw is our tendency to decline gradually.” It happens slowly, rotting us from the inside out so we don’t notice until it’s too late.

“That’s what I heard, anyway.”

“Interesting...”

As Nagafuji blathered away, I continued to lie sprawled out over the *kotatsu* table. Meanwhile, Adachi reached another goal. For someone who claimed not to know the game’s rules, she progressed from checkpoint to checkpoint really quickly... Maybe that lack of knowledge kept her laser-focused on one specific objective. Despite her confusion, she seemed in much brighter spirits than usual, so clearly she was happy that she was winning.

As for me, I’d somehow ended up in last place. *Oh no* . I pushed myself back up into a sitting position. Now was not the time for me to molder in the *kotatsu*.

That day found us all hanging out at Nagafuji’s house after school. Her family ran a butcher shop, and while I’d purchased food from their store countless times, this was only my second time setting foot in their living space. The smell and crackle of the fryer oil permeated the whole building, and while I enjoyed it, it also kind of made me hungry.

Last time I was here, I’d only stayed for a cup of tea, but today we were playing video games. This solicitation—*Wait, am I using that word right? Whatever* —basically all started during lunch, when Hino and Nagafuji announced that they wanted to play *Momotetsu* .

“Meh, let’s just call this a study in geography.”

Hino sat closest to the TV, one knee bent, intently focused on the game. Considering that this was her idea to begin with, it made sense that she was the most invested. Then again, she tended to invest in pretty much *any* competition, no matter whose idea it was.

Conversely, Nagafuji and I both zonked out at the *kotatsu* , stretching our arms out and flailing our hands, like a couple of dying bugs wiggling their legs with the last of their strength. *On second thought, that's a really gross mental image.*

Then it was SHIMAMURA (MANAGER)'s turn, so I rolled the dice without really paying attention.

Because we had to take turns using the controllers in pairs (Adachi and Hino, me and Nagafuji), we naturally had to sit in pairs too. Nagafuji and I essentially took over the *kotatsu* , though—were the others cold at all? Adachi sat diagonally to my left, and Hino sat diagonally to my right. At first, we had to teach Adachi how to play *Momotetsu* , but now that we were on our sixth year in-game, she'd pretty much gotten the hang of things. She wasn't using any of her action cards, but whatever.

"They say only mean people are good at this game, so clearly you must be a saint, Shimamura," snarked HINO (PRIEST). But... going by that logic would mean that Adachi was a total monster.

Speaking of Adachi, she glanced over her shoulder at me. "I, uh...I think you probably are a saint," she stammered, her eyes darting in all directions.



“Why, thank you,” I replied offhandedly. Seriously, though, I appreciated her trying to offer me a consolation prize for being in last place. Side note: Adachi’s in-game job title was now CEO. And Nagafuji was...a robot. Yeah.

Every time NAGAFUJI (ROBOT) acquired an action card, she used it on the spot with no thought given to strategy or timing. Fitting, I know. If the card in question allowed her to choose a target, she always chose Hino, and if it succeeded, Nagafuji celebrated like it was her birthday. *This robot really needs to chill out.*

Honestly, you didn’t *need* more than two players for this game, so part of me was confused as to why they bothered inviting Adachi and me at all. I mean, sure, I was technically friends with them... but was Adachi? Somehow, I doubted that she felt any sort of kinship toward them at all. If I wasn’t invited, she probably wouldn’t have tagged along. She just wasn’t a “quantity over quality” sort of girl when it came to friends. As for me, I tended to enjoy this sort of thing, so I didn’t really mind hanging out.

After that, I remained in last place for some reason; meanwhile, Adachi oscillated between first and second. Then, in a blink, it was 7 P.M., so we decided to call it a night.

“We’ll finish the game some other time.”

“Unless the console gets reset.”

“Yeah... That’s the scariest part of the cartridge generation.”

Hino and Nagafuji were having some conversation about old game consoles, but personally, I’d never seen one this old until today. From the yellow discoloration, you could tell the console had “grown up” right alongside its owners.

Did we ever have one of those when I was young?

As the years passed, we kept swapping out our old games for newer ones. Now they were probably collecting dust somewhere, along with the rest of my childhood memories. After all, I never could commit to anything for very long.

So, how had I made it this far?

Outside, the chilly night air clamped painfully around my arms and legs. My breath floated out in a pale puff, as if to light up

the pitch- darkness.

“Hey, um...want me to...take you home?” Adachi asked suddenly.

It was a kind offer, of course, but we lived in two different directions. “That’s pretty far out of your way... Are you sure?” I asked.

She nodded eagerly, so I decided to take her up on it. Setting my bookbag in her bike cart, I hopped on the back.

Honestly, Hino’s full of shit. Adachi’s way too much of a sweetheart to be mean.

“You know, you’ve really changed a lot since we first met,” I murmured pensively, peering at her face right before we set off. The old Adachi never would’ve tagged along with me for hours. She’d been a lot quieter, and when she did speak, it was only ever a few curt words.

“Ugh, don’t remind me,” she replied in a tiny, shy voice. Evidently, she agreed with my sentiment.

Not to suggest she had changed for the worse, of course—if anything, she could stand to be a little more confident. On the other hand, she *was* acting a bit weirder these days. Okay...a *lot* weirder. But...I guess I didn’t really mind.

At this time of year, the sun set long before 7 P.M. The darkness was different from summer’s; it was deeper, heavier. Out here in the countryside, there were a few sporadic streetlamps, but the street itself stretched ahead of us like a black viper. Nevertheless, with only the occasional pinprick of light to illuminate our path, we forged ahead.

“Did you have fun?” I asked. Then I got a strange sense of *déjà vu* , like maybe I’d asked her that before.

“Yeah,” Adachi replied, staring straight ahead. Her voice was as dry as the winter wind.

Hmmm. Well, it’s not like I’m her mom. She can make her own decisions, I guess.

“Hey, Shimamura? Don’t forget, uh, in three days...”

I really wish you’d stop looking up at me while you’re steering the

bike! This definitely wasn't her first time doing it, either.

"Chocolate, right? Don't worry, I won't forget," I replied, my smile stiff.

Come to think of it, I still haven't bought any, have I? I'd rather not have to rush around at the last minute, so I should go buy it tomorrow or the day after. Then all I'll have to do is give it to her, I guess.

Honestly, I was kind of worried that this wasn't going to be as fun and exciting as Adachi hoped. After all, she already knew that I was giving her something.

But chocolate was delicious and sweet—and it was precisely the foreknowledge of its taste that enabled my cravings. So maybe, in a way, Adachi had it right: sometimes surprises *were* overrated.

~Wednesday, February 12~

At my current pace, I figured I was *probably* going to make it in time for first period. So, when I passed the graveyard, I slowed to a walk. The strong winter wind brushed against my flushed skin, draining it of all the warmth I'd built up running. It had started blustering around midnight last night, and it showed no sign of stopping anytime soon. The *whhhssssh* sound in my ears was deafening. Fun fact: when I was little, I thought that was the sound clouds made when they rubbed against each other.

Maybe I should get a part-time job, like Adachi, so I can save up to buy my own bike, I thought as I caught my breath. After all, the so-called "family bicycle" was practically my mom's personal bike at this point. I would've liked it if she at least let me use it on days when I was running late, but nope. Instead, she insisted that it was my fault for oversleeping in the first place—and she was right. *But if you know I'm going to be late, I'd appreciate it if you'd wake me up, you jerk!*

Ultimately, I guess she just wanted me to handle everything on my own. Better than her constantly micromanaging me, at least. As a result, I was responsible for leaving late...and everything it led to.

As I passed the little park next to the cemetery, I noticed a

conspicuous head of hair fluttering in the breeze like a butterfly, shedding sparkles instead of scales. It was Yashiro, doing calisthenics of all things. Naturally, she was alone, facing the graveyard and cheerfully counting to herself as she did side stretches. Watching her, the only thing that came to mind was, *God, she's so weird.*

She hadn't noticed me yet, so I debated minding my own business and going to school. But I couldn't very well just leave her here, standing out in public on a weekday morning with no backpack in sight. I knew that first period was going to start soon, but I took a detour into the park regardless.

She spotted me and immediately dashed over. "Well, if it isn't Shimamura-san!"

How can you wear that sleeveless summer dress in the middle of winter? No leggings or anything. I touched her shoulder curiously; it felt like ice (no surprise there). Yet it was perfectly smooth, without so much as a single goose bump.

"Did you need something?" she asked.

"No, not particularly." *But you probably shouldn't be out here at this time of day. Not that I have any right to judge.* "Don't you have school today?"

"Ha ha ha! Don't be silly. I'm a grown adult," she declared smugly.

"Right." Experimentally, I grabbed her and lifted her high into the air.

"Wheeee!" she squealed, flailing her limbs.

Grown adult, my ass. "If you start skipping school at your age, you'll be a delinquent for life."

Yashiro was even lighter than my sister; I swung her from side to side, shaking free a cascade of blue sparkles that the wind promptly carried off. It was actually kind of fun to track the air currents with the naked eye.

"I *am* 680 years old, you know."

"Oh, right, I totally forgot."

Didn't realize 680-year-old aliens were all as short and scrawny as

my sister. Man, if I had to live that long, I'd probably die of boredom.

I set her down on the ground, and she shot me a look that said, "Is that all?" I mouthed back, "That's all."

With a wave, I decided it was time to part ways. "Anyway, I gotta go to school. See ya."

Admittedly, I wasn't fully on board with the idea of leaving a young child alone in a park, but I didn't have the free time to babysit her, either. Yet I could feel something pulling me back.

I stopped near the park entrance and glanced over my shoulder. Sure enough, Yashiro was looking at me. I turned around, jogged a few steps, then stopped and glanced back again. Still looking at me.

"Oh, for crying out loud."

I turned back. *Must be those big-sister instincts kicking in*, I groaned to myself as I cursed my lack of commitment.

Yashiro greeted my return with a smirk. "It seems this ninja technique is rather convenient."

"What 'ninja technique'?"

"The one where I stare at you until you turn back." She struck a ninja pose.

Total grown adult over here. "Sorry to burst your bubble, but it wasn't your *ninja skills* that made it happen. I'm just a *super* -nice person."

"Oh, yes, of course! You are a super-nice person!"

I'd meant it as a joke, but then she agreed, and I didn't really know what to say after that. In fact, I was low-key embarrassed to have said it at all.

"I hope you're grateful," I added.

"Yes! I'm so grateful!" She dashed forward and wrapped her arms around my midsection in a hug.

I didn't actually need her to thank me, but she'd called me on my bluff, and now I was left without a way out of it. Then she started nuzzling her face against my stomach. She was so pure and innocent, her heart probably sparkled just as much as her hair. So, why did that kind of unabashed sincerity rub me the wrong way?

Perhaps it was because, at age sixteen, I was caught halfway between childhood and adulthood, and anything that wasn't buried in a thick layer of irony was hard to accept head-on. Was this just part of the territory that came with being a teenager?

"Well, I don't think we should keep standing around here...but I'm not sure where else we could really go."

I was wearing a school uniform, so we couldn't exactly hang out at a café or anything. And while Yashiro and I were technically friends, she was very visibly not related to me, and I didn't want people to think I was some kind of child kidnapper.

My first thought was to walk her to her house, but somehow I could tell without asking that I was never going to find out where she lived. Not because I genuinely believed that she was an alien, but still. Just a feeling I had.

With nowhere else to go, my instinctive next thought was the gym loft at my school. It was what my brain defaulted to when I tried to think of a secluded little nook, which is how I'd ended up hanging out there in the first place.

"Let's go to your house!" Yashiro suggested, still persistently clinging to my midsection.

My house, huh? My mother was probably gone by now, so it wasn't strictly out of the question. Still, if I went back home, it would mean forfeiting any illusion I had of actually going to school today.

"Is Little home?"

"Little? Oh, you mean my sister?"

Yashiro nodded eagerly.

In what world would my kid sister be at home on a weekday morning? "She's at school. Remember?"

"Awwwww..." Yashiro slumped in a dramatic display of disappointment. Fortunately, her grip on me loosened, and I found I could use my legs again.

Glancing away from the graveyard in the vague direction of my high school, I scratched my head. "Well...I guess it can't hurt as long as I don't make a habit of it." And so, I took responsibility and made the conscious choice to skip school.

It felt so odd, walking back down the same path I'd just run—not to mention with a little blue-haired gremlin in tow. I hated the cold, and I hated expending energy, so what was I even doing with my life?

Yet, despite my weary sigh, I found I didn't mind it much at all.

I pulled off my jacket and crawled back into my futon, still wearing the rest of my uniform. I knew I'd suffer for my transgressions, but I just couldn't be bothered. Then at some point I drifted off to sleep, and when I awoke, I found Yashiro sound asleep beside me under the blanket.

Her head still rested on my arm, which was now numb from the elbow down. Was this the peaceful, sleeping face of a six-hundred-year-old? Doubtful. As I watched her, I felt my eyelids slowly grow heavier once more. Even after they shut, I still faintly saw those blue sparkles... It was so cozy and peaceful, I felt a pleasant dream waiting for me.

An unknown amount of time passed...and then my fuzzy brain faintly heard the doorbell ring. But I was in no condition to get out of bed.

Yashiro, however, sprang out on a hair-trigger and started spinning in place. "Are you sleepy, Shimamura-san?"

"Mnnnn..."

"Shall I answer it for you?"

"Yes, please..."

"Leave it to me!" She tottered off down the hall.

She's so much more considerate than my sister, I thought, impressed. Smiling, I rolled over—but, right as I was about to drift back off to sleep, I realized my mistake.

If the person at our door was a newspaper salesman...or a neighbor...or...literally anyone, now that I thought about it... Yashiro's presence would only cause *more* problems. So, left with no other option, I forced myself out of bed and headed after her.

My brain was still half asleep, and everything from my neck to my lower back felt like lead. Rubbing my eyes, I stepped out of my room...and spotted Adachi standing at the threshold. From the fact that she wore her uniform, my guess was that she'd decided to stop by after school let out.

"Oh, hey, it's Adachi."

Admittedly, I was kind of surprised to see her here. I looked down at my clothes, and sure enough, they were completely wrinkled, just as I feared they would be.

"Oh well." *No big deal—it's just Adachi*, I figured, so I didn't bother running back into my room to get changed. Then I realized the little blue one was missing. "Where's Yashiro?"

"She left. Said she had to go 'procure dinner,' whatever that means."

"Oh, right. She's such a free spirit. So, what's up?"

I gave her a look that asked, "Did you need something?"

"Well, you didn't come to school today, so I thought maybe you were sick. I sent you a message, you know," Adachi explained quickly, fiddling with her bangs.



At the word “message,” I turned back and glanced in the direction of my room. *Where did I put my phone? Oh, right. It’s probably still in my bookbag.*

“Oh, sorry. I left my phone in my bag, so I didn’t notice.”

At this point, my neck and back started to feel better. Cold air blew through the open front door, clearing the fuzz from my mind. *Knowing me, I give it maybe sixty seconds before the cold goes from “nice” to “nightmare.”*

So, why was Adachi here? She looked a bit sulky; her lips pouted slightly. Was she annoyed that I didn’t respond to her message?

“Well, anyway, I came by to make sure you were doing okay. Sorry if I woke you.”

“Awww, you’re such a sweetheart!” I reached out to her completely on impulse, as if she were my little sister; my fingers combed through her hair. But the arm I used was still numb from when Yashiro slept on it, so I couldn’t feel much of anything. What a waste.

Initially Adachi flinched when I touched her, but after that, she stared at the floor and let me carry on.

“Ack, sorry. Force of habit.”

I didn’t want her to yell at me for being patronizing, so I started to pull away—but she leaned forward with my retreating hand, almost as if she was drawn by magnetic force. Was this her way of saying “keep going”? As a test, I started petting her again; in response, she fell still. Evidently, I was right.

Now I understood precisely what Adachi wanted from me; she wanted something to lean on. Something that would be there for her no matter what.

In the past, that “something” was the gym-loft wall. We shared that space together, watched the seasons change together, moved on together... Now *I* was the thing holding her up. How did that happen?

“Well, okay then.”

Bashful, Adachi stared at the floor...but she didn’t pull away. I

didn't know what was going on with her, but at least the feeling started returning to my hand.

She was a needy baby, and I'd accepted that. Our connection was as real as the hair between my fingers.

~Thursday, February 13~

Unfortunately, after babysitting all day, I wasn't able to go shop for chocolate yesterday. (Yes, I'm blaming that on Yashiro, and no, I don't feel bad about it.) Now my only option was today after school, so I spent all of gym class thinking about where to go. After all, grocery-store chocolate bars were casual snacks, not heartfelt gifts. Maybe my sister wouldn't mind if I gave her the cheap stuff, but Adachi absolutely would. At least, I was pretty sure. She seemed to care about formalities a little more than I did.

Adachi and I sat on the sidelines, watching the volleyball sail back and forth through the air while Hino and Nagafuji ran around their half of the court. Hino was doing fine, but Nagafuji moved basically at random, and even I could tell that she was an active detriment to her team. *Maybe wear your glasses next time.*

As the two of us sat side by side on the yellowed and slightly squeaky gym floor, I could almost hear the chirping of last summer's cicadas. I glanced at Adachi out of the corner of my eye to find her staring up at the second-floor loft. Evidently, she was reminiscing too. Did some part of her still want to go back there?

Sad to say, we'd freeze into little ice statues if we tried to hide out up there right now. I was content to simply follow the flow of the ever-changing seasons instead, so I faced forward and pretended not to notice where she was looking. *Time to figure out my after-school plans.*

The candy store near the bookshop was an option. Its parking lot was always full whenever I passed by, which naturally led me to think the place must be popular. It was also, if memory served, the same place where I'd bought a cake for my sister's birthday. Not that I really remembered what the cake tasted like, other than "sugary."

I could take the train to Nagoya and check the underground

mall—they'd probably have a lot more options there—but, given my inclination toward laziness, it was doubtful I could work up the motivation to actually go. Granted, Adachi would probably appreciate it more if I did, but... Well, I mean, obviously I wanted my gift to make her happy, but... Again, the level of effort made me hesitate.

By the time gym class ended and lunch period began, I'd successfully decided I would bite the bullet and buy something from the local candy store. On to my meal—a premade sandwich I'd picked up at the convenience store on my way to school this morning. Adachi also had a sandwich; she washed down each bite with a sip of mineral water. Why did her lunch seem so miserable and bland in comparison? Was it because I couldn't see her face from back here?

Sometimes the two of us ate lunch together; sometimes we ate separately. Each day had a fifty-fifty chance of either outcome. But it wasn't like the days of the week were any different from each other—so what was it that inspired Adachi to come sit with me only some of the time? I was a tiny bit curious. Did she only want to eat lunch together on good days? Or was it a consolation prize reserved for bad days?

As I contemplated this, my phone rang inside my bookbag. Normally I kept it turned off during school hours, but today I must've forgotten. Who could possibly be calling me? I took it out to check.

It was Tarumi. Her ash-brown hair floated to the forefront of my mind. *Tarumi's calling me?* This was something I hadn't anticipated. Since the classroom was a little too loud for a phone call, I stepped out into the hallway, walked to the end, and leaned against the wall. Then I picked up the phone.

“Hello?”

I felt the chill of the wall through my uniform. I pressed my bare thigh against it experimentally and nearly yelped in surprise.

“Hey, Shima-chan. You free today?”

She didn't even bother saying “it's Tarumi”—just cut straight to her question. So, was I free today? “You mean after school? I was gonna go shopping real quick.”

“Mind if I tag along? Or were you gonna go with your other friends?”

The conversation was progressing pretty much the way I’d expected it to—in other words, we were planning another hangout. It still felt so sudden, though. *What should I say?*

She was an old friend. Emphasis on *old*. I didn’t know this new her. At the same time, if we were friends before—and in fact, we were besties—maybe we could be friends again. Maybe that magic was still there.

“Nah, no one else is coming, but you can tag along if you want. Where do you wanna meet up?”

“How about at the station? Maybe in front of the donut shop?”

“Mmm...sure, that’ll work. Meet you there after school at like...4:30.”

With this agreement now in place, I hung up. Then I stared at the phone screen and stroked my chin in contemplation. I wasn’t expecting to hear from Tarumi, much less see her again, quite so soon.

“Guess I *am* going to see her again, huh?”

I had some faint, lingering reservations about the choice I’d made.

In elementary school, Tarumi and I were practically inseparable, like Hino and Nagafuji. So, maybe it wouldn’t be that weird...but on the other hand, I wasn’t exactly excited, either. We’d have to make up for lost time with a lot of conversation. Granted, we’d obviously have to talk about something either way, but... Well, maybe it would all work itself out. In the end, I decided to err on the side of optimism.

Anyway, since I was already obligated to go to the train station, maybe it couldn’t hurt to ride out to Nagoya and see what they had on offer. One reason was never quite enough to motivate me, but when there were *two* reasons to do something, I started to delude myself into thinking it was the rational choice. *Weird how my brain works.*

When I stepped back into the classroom, I found Adachi looking over at me. I waved at her; she waved back stiffly. *Nice.*

Mission accomplished. Of course, I hadn't actually accomplished anything, but that was neither here nor there—I was now in an uncommonly good mood.

When I walked back to my desk, I found Nagafuji *eating my freaking sandwich*. She chewed slowly, pensively, as if she was ruminating on its flavor.

“Hey!”

“Little too heavy on the mayo with this one.”

“What gives you the right to eat my food?!”

There she was, sitting at *my* desk, eating (and critiquing) *my* lunch. *Who do you think you are? Yashiro?* I chased Nagafuji out of my chair and examined my sandwich.

“Ugh, you took *giant* bites!”

There was almost nothing left of it. The crust formed a crescent, like the meager remains of a bombed island. Furthermore, as if in exchange, half of a ground-meat cutlet now sat on my desk.

“If you add one of our signature cutlets to your sandwich, it'll taste a lot better,” Nagafuji explained matter-of-factly, the corners of her mouth sticky with mayonnaise.

“Gee, thanks for the sales pitch. I'll be sure to let my mom know.” I raised a hand and shooed her away.

She jogged back over to Hino...

“Did you bring me some?”

“Sure did.”

...and put one final bite of my sandwich into Hino's mouth.
You jerks!

I contemplated a counterattack, but from the looks of it, they'd already finished their food. So, I settled for the cutlet instead. *Pretty sure I ate this same thing last week, but whatever*, I thought, nibbling cautiously in case Hino and Nagafuji had put something weird inside to prank me. Nope, just ordinary minced meat. Relieved, I glanced over at them. *Aaaand they're thumb wrestling. Never a dull moment with those two.* I shook my head and laughed to myself.

Then Adachi turned and looked back at me. I started to wave

at her again, but she beat me to the punch this time. Why did she always have to make it look so awkward? Her movements were tense and jittery, almost like she wasn't sure how long to wave for. It was funny, the way the wave perfectly encapsulated her timid, anxious energy. Still, I waved back smoothly as if trying to set an example.

For once, my lunchtime wasn't quite so bland.

It was fun to share a classroom with Hino, Nagafuji, and Adachi. I enjoyed their silly antics. But this would only last another two months at most.

What sort of springtime was in the cards for me?

This time of year, I always hated having to go outside. Silently, I cursed whoever decided to put Valentine's Day in February. I mean, obviously there were probably legitimate cultural reasons for that. Plus, it couldn't happen in summer or else the chocolate would melt. But, in that case, why focus on chocolate at all?

First, I hurried home to change clothes; then I rode our family bicycle to the train station. Times like these, I was really starting to wish I had a bike of my own so I could get to and from school more easily. Maybe I could pick up a short-term part-time job during spring vacation. *I should ask Adachi about it, since she knows more about this stuff than I do.*

Fighting against the flow of people—students young and old, all of them heading home for the day—I soon arrived at the station. By the time I reached the donut shop, Tarumi was already waiting for me in the exact same spot where Adachi and I had eaten our donuts. She wore her school uniform, but didn't carry a bookbag; when she spotted me, she pulled her shoes on and rose to her feet.

“Sup!”

“Good evening,” I greeted her, then immediately realized it wasn't evening yet. But, instead of correcting myself, I fell silent.

She led me to the nearby escalator, and we hopped on. I

hadn't told her about my plans, but apparently she was contemplating somewhere in the general direction of Nagoya too. As I stared at the back of Tarumi's head, something felt ever-so-faintly wrong about this. Almost like I was hanging out with a stranger.

"So, what are you going shopping for?"

"Chocolate."

"Oh yeah? You got a boyfriend or something?" she asked excitedly.

No, but I'm guessing you probably do. "Nah, it's just for a friend," I answered.

We never would have gossiped about boys back in elementary school. *I guess we really have grown up.* But when comparing my memories to my reality, my memories were bound to lose. A tiny pinprick of melancholy pierced my chest.

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, really."

Like a baby bird, our conversation fluttered and flopped, but never quite got off the ground. Try as we might, we couldn't spread our wings and take flight. The lost time worked against us.

As I bought a ticket from the ticket machine on the second floor, I thought about Adachi. If she saw me hanging out with another friend, I was pretty sure things would get...you know... *weird* . Like if she'd seen me holding hands with Yashiro that one time. That kind of weird.

I hardly ever took the train in general, especially not at this time of day, so it felt kind of surreal to pass through the turnstiles. On the staircase, we crossed paths with some Nagoya high-school students. Tarumi started walking faster; I picked up the pace to match. She must've realized that the Nagoya-bound train had already pulled up to the platform.

When we reached the landing, the intercom informed us that the train would depart shortly, so we raced into the closest car. We'd only taken a few steps inside by the time the doors closed behind us.

"Close shave, huh?"

“Yeah, we really cut it close.”

Breathing heavily, Tarumi smoothed down her hair. Meanwhile, I straightened my shirt. We turned in the direction of the train’s movement. Up ahead, there was a single seat available in a cluster of four facing each other; Tarumi and I exchanged a glance, but neither of us took the initiative.

“Wanna sit down?” I asked.

“You can if you want to,” she replied.

There was an awkward silence as we stood there, frozen—staring at each other, but not really seeing.

I caved.

“Okay then...I guess I’ll...sit down?”

“Sure.”

Neither of us were actively trying to be polite; we were both just too reserved to make a move. Maybe if there were two free seats, this would’ve played out a little more smoothly.

Even after I took the seat, however, I still felt incredibly awkward.

Gripping the grab rail nearest me, Tarumi stood directly in front of me. She stooped slightly, as if to get a good look at my face. What were we supposed to talk about now? I dug through my old memories, hoping for something I could use as a reference, but nothing came to mind. Our favorite snacks? Field trips at school? Anime?

My mind was all over the place, desperately poring over anything and everything I remembered, but I couldn’t concentrate on any one memory in particular. Instead, I decided my only option was to default to a safe topic: current events.

“So...you’re in high school now, huh?”

“Yeah, man. Check out this uniform!”

She tugged her sleeve and laughed. I laughed with her. *God, I’m so stupid.*

“You’re in high school too, right, Shima-chan?”

“Duh.” *We’re the same age, remember?*

Now that we'd both stated the obvious, we fell silent. The conversation was threatening to die. This looming silence with her was different—tenser—compared to silence with Adachi. When Adachi and I ran out of things to say, the air between us grew cold...but at least we could revive it with a little warmth. With Tarumi, however, it felt like I was trying to reheat stale, month-old leftovers.

Some things were just better-off thrown out and replaced.

“Are you actually going to school these days?” I asked. “I heard you skip.”

“Sometimes I go, sometimes I don’t. What about you? Your hair can’t seem to make up its mind.” She reached out and grabbed two strands of my hair—one dark, one bleached. I looked at them as she held them up, suspended aloft like a bug’s antennae.

Brown and black. New me, old me.

“Say, what was it you used to call me back in elementary school?” Tarumi asked, stooping a bit lower. Her question—and her gaze—made my heart skip a beat.

As she reached out to touch the past, her hand pricked me like a tiny thorn.

“Dunno. I forget.”

Truth be told, I still remembered...but my embarrassment won out. As a result, my reply came out a lot more flippant than I meant it to.

For a moment, Tarumi stared, eyes wide, mouth agape. My expression followed suit as I realized my error. I pursed my lips tightly together as if they were frozen stiff.

She let go of my hair and closed her eyes. “You’ve really changed, haven’t you, Shima-chan?”

“Yeah.”

Maybe that was my biggest problem. The old me was so different, she was practically another person. Cheerful, friendly, ditzzy, free-spirited... Honestly, I was a lot like Yashiro back then. Was that the version of me Tarumi hoped to hang out with? I felt so awkward, almost like I was the Adachi of this friendship.

Real life just wasn't as malleable as memories were.

Tarumi turned her back to me and stared out the window for a long, long moment. As that moment wore on, I started to wish the train would make a U-turn so I could go home. Fortunately(?), not long after I started bargaining with God to get me out of here, we pulled into Nagoya station.

It was only a twenty-minute train ride, if that, yet somehow it had felt three times longer than my least-favorite class at school. My joints were stiff, and my body felt like lead. Evidently, stress had descended over my physical form like a light dusting of snow.

As we silently deboarded the train onto the platform, Tarumi and I encountered crowds upon crowds of people waiting in lines. While we walked past, my nose picked up all sorts of smells, both good and bad. As we stepped through the turnstiles, the variety of scents only increased further.

On our way to the department store, Tarumi looked at the station's trademark Golden Clock. "Do you remember the murder that happened here a few years ago?"

"What? There was a murder?"

I didn't recollect that at all. Reflexively, I looked up at the clock, then back down at the people waiting beneath it. It was such a popular landmark, I could scarcely imagine a corpse or bloodstain under it. *Time marches on, I guess.*

"Yeah, there was. Big cities are scary like that, huh?"

"No kidding," I nodded.

And so, the two country bumpkins entered the department store.

We passed the kiosks of hats and purses and boarded the down escalator—Tarumi in front, me behind her. Something about this felt off, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

As with the last time I'd been here, the basement floor brimmed with people. The lights were unnaturally bright to the point that they actually made me uncomfortable. At first I wandered aimlessly, but then I smelled something sugary and tracked it to the confectionery section.

Both Tarumi and I were too busy looking around to really try

to have a conversation. If we put the effort in, we could surely have dug up some old anecdote to wax nostalgic about, but the winter ground was too cold and hard for those seeds of potential to take root.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Tarumi could tell I felt that way, too. I couldn't even look her in the eye.

Once we entered the confectionery section, I started to have second thoughts about shopping for chocolate. I had failed to ask Adachi what kind she liked, so I didn't have any idea what to look for. After a moment of internal debate, I decided I'd buy my gift at the kiosk with the longest line at the register. After all, if a lot of people shopped there, then clearly the products had to be good stuff, right? It felt like a logical deduction, but at the same time, it also felt like the easy way out.

Since Tarumi wasn't planning to buy anything, I didn't really see the need for her to line up, but she joined me nonetheless. Now I felt guilty for dragging her here...but if I tried to apologize, I would come off as distant. Then again, we weren't exactly best friends anymore.

Here in this warm, bustling hub of social activity, we were as cold as winter itself.

After a long, long wait, I finally bought my chocolates. Tarumi and I both heaved deep sighs, as though we shared the physical strain of overexerting ourselves in an unfamiliar social setting.

Well, at least that's one thing we have in common, I thought sadly.

We walked silently to the escalator, stepped aboard, and rode back up to the ground floor. The only sound was my paper bag crinkling. Directly ahead of us, I caught sight of an LED display—used for advertising purposes, but currently deactivated—positioned outside the station. Beyond the display lay the purple sunset.

This was normally the part when I would ask where we were headed next—if there was anywhere she wanted to go. But my gaze was fixed straight ahead, and the words wouldn't come.

Tarumi was waiting for me to say it...or, more accurately, waiting for the old me to step out from behind the curtain. But if so,

she'd be waiting a long time. The only words I could offer her were those the chilly winter air drove out of me. The words of a coward.

"Okay, well...time to go home, I guess?"

"Yeah."

Perhaps "agonizing" was the best way to describe this moment.

This was supposed to be fun and exciting, to breathe new life into an old friendship. But in reality, there was no magic spark. The air between us was heavy, suffocating, and downright frustrating.

If I were to lay the blame at someone's feet, most likely the fault was mine. I didn't know how to rekindle the fire, so instead I shuddered in the cold.

We walked all the way back to the turnstiles without any detours. Honestly speaking, I didn't expect the shopping trip to be over quite this quickly. I'd spent more time waiting in line than talking to my so-called friend.

Good thing I hadn't emailed my mom to tell her that I wouldn't need any dinner tonight. That wasn't a conscious choice made in anticipation of this outcome, yet it ended up working out in my favor regardless.

I turned to look at Tarumi—scratching her head, eyes closed, like she was tired. Tired of the new me. Surprisingly enough, the thought really hurt.

So, I pretended not to see her.

We passed through the turnstiles, up the stairs, and directly onto the crowded rush-hour train.

To the right, night had fallen; to the left, the sunset still faintly lingered. Almost as if the train car's windows were barriers between two separate worlds. Swaying in the crowd, I let my mind float away into the darkness like a lantern set adrift.

What value did people see in the past? Was it a time when they were happier? More innocent? Back before they got hurt? If so, all these things equally applied to myself. But my past was bound in brambles, and if I tried to pull it close, the thorns would cut me deep. I didn't have the experience required to navigate around them without getting injured.

I couldn't think of any especially bad memories off the top of my head, but my past self was just so different from my current self, I didn't want to look her in the eye. Maybe, in a way, I didn't like change...or maybe I just really liked the person I was right now? *Yeah, that makes sense.* I wanted to stay the way I was—I didn't want to remember the version of me who never learned from her mistakes.

Classic teenager nonsense, I scoffed to myself as I pretended to be unaffected.

Just then, my phone beeped. Since I was standing there in silence, I managed to hear it through the hum of noise in the train car. It was an email from Adachi. Casually shielding my phone from Tarumi's view, I opened the email curiously.

"Are you free tomorrow would you want to go somewhere and hang out"

The message was one big jumble with no punctuation, as if she wrote it really quickly. I pictured her typing on her phone at the speed of light and chuckled to myself; Tarumi heard and looked over at me.

"What's so funny?"

"Huh? Oh, uh, nothing," I replied, pressing a hand to my mouth. For some reason, I didn't want to tell her...and that felt like an indication of where things stood with our friendship. I promptly wrote back to Adachi. *"Sure, no problem."*

This was the friendship I cherished today.

The train arrived at our little town. Tarumi got off first, and I followed after her. That was when I realized that we hadn't spent much time walking side by side. Adachi, however, *always* wanted to walk next to me—mostly so she could hold my hand.

There was a time when I used to walk shoulder to shoulder with Tarumi, but now we walked single file...and the moment we entered a crowd, we might just go our separate ways forever. That was where we stood right now.

Once we went through the turnstiles, my former best friend turned back to me. Strangers passed her in a steady stream on both sides, and the current was starting to pull her away.

She raised a hand casually. “Well...see you.”

There was a hesitant pause as Tarumi offered a curt goodbye. I stood there, stock-still, and watched her go.

Is this what you want?

The question swayed me as if I was in the train car all over again.

Then I realized something. At some point I’d made a mistake—some sort of stumble along the way—and I’d probably have an easier time saying goodbye if I made sure to correct it first.

I couldn’t change my past self, but I could change this. I could change *us* .

“Hmm...”

Something held me back.

“Hmmm...”

Something I couldn’t quite define.

“Mmmmm...”

I knew what I was supposed to do, yet all I could do was groan. My brain boiled.

“Mmmnngh...!”

Figure it out already! I smacked the back of my head. Hard. My vision swam from the impact.

Then, at last, I realized what I needed to do.

Staring into the fog wouldn’t get me anywhere, but if I blurred myself to match, I started to see something. I ran after it, deep into the forest. Before it disappeared completely, I reached out and seized those brambles with all my might.

For once, it wasn’t the pain I was afraid of.

“Taru-chaaaaan!”

I had no thorns in my palms—only flushed cheeks and a thumping heart.

Once upon a time, she was my favorite person in the whole world. Would my voice reach her through the crowd?

No. She was fading into the distance, one step at a time. She

couldn't hear me.

My arms slumped to my sides—but then I decided to try again. I cupped my hands firmly around my mouth.

“I’M TALKING TO YOU, TARU-CHAAAAN!”

It was the old me calling out to her.

I couldn't turn my back on the present. For most people, change didn't come easily. So, really, this was just a tiny fraction of the old me, briefly rising to the surface.

Tarumi whirled around suddenly, the same way she had at the butcher shop the day we reunited. She had a shocked look on her face; I didn't know what *I* looked like, but if I had to guess, I was probably smiling.

“I’ll see you around!”

My voice was loud and cheerful, like it used to be back in the days when I believed in forever.

If memory served, “I’ll see you around” was the last thing I’d said to her back in elementary school—a turn of phrase so casual, it didn’t even count as a promise. Back then, I was so sure I’d see her again soon...and then “soon” turned into years. Did she even remember?

The truant girl raised her hand and waved emphatically, grinning from ear to ear as if we were kids again. All these years later, we were exchanging the same unspoken vow to one day meet again.

Would there even *be* a next time? I didn't know. Our friendship had long since rusted over and fallen apart. Maybe the wreckage had simply caught the light at just the right angle.

But there was one thing I could say for sure: Tarumi's smile was so electrifying, it zapped me right down to my fingertips.

And so, the fourteenth finally rolled around.

Man, that took forever.

Interlude:
A Visit to the Butcher's Shop
Part 5

DOES HINO like my boobs?

“Hmm...”

She always seemed to find an excuse to touch them—or rather, hit them. Pretty hard, too. Sometimes it really hurt, so I always did my best to block her. So, did she like them, or what?

“Hmmm...”

“What are you pretending to think about now, huh?” Hino teased across the table from me. She was always close at hand.

The easiest option would be to ask her directly, of course, but someone once told me that I needed to think critically for myself sometimes...or did they? On second thought, maybe I read that in a manga. Regardless of where I picked it up, though, it was still an important lesson. So, I stopped eating and started thinking.

Personally, I *hated* my boobs. They always drew attention to themselves, and it made me self-conscious. But if Hino liked them, then maybe it was time I re-evaluated how I felt about them.

“Mmmmm...”

“You can think about it all you want, but no matter what it is, you’re just going to forget three seconds from now.”

Rude! I’m not THAT dumb!

I looked at Hino. Her chest was...meager...and she was short. The exact opposite of me. How did we turn out so differently when we’d eaten so much of the same food growing up? *Note to self: ask her about it later.* Right now, I needed to think about why Hino enjoyed touching someone else’s bosom. Did she like my boobs or not? Which was it?

“Mmmnngh...!”

“Here, have some chocolate.”

“Gahhh!”

And so, I pretty much completely forgot whatever it was I was agonizing about.

~ Today's Adachi Forecast~

How often can I email Shimamura without it being weird?

I debated the issue for days and days and days... Then I realized that two weeks had passed since my last email, so I sent another.

Two weeks it is.

Chapter 4: Marigold (A Saint's Loving Embrace)

TO NO ONE'S SURPRISE, least of all my own, I didn't get any sleep that night. As I squinted against the rays of morning sun streaming in between the gaps in the curtains, I summed myself up in one sentence.

"I never learn."

The slightest shake of my head resulted in throbbing pain, as if my brain was slamming against my skull. I felt like a little kid who'd been too excited to sleep the night before a field trip. Lethargy weighed on my body like a ton of bricks, and I closed my eyes. In the darkness, I could focus on the sound of my own breathing and shut off my other four senses. Detached from my shoulders and my heavy head, I exhaled, then inhaled again.

I repeated this process a few times until, oddly enough, the sluggish feeling began to recede. Once it was gone, I reached over and grabbed my phone beside my pillow. I checked my inbox just in case, but I hadn't received any messages since Shimamura's "*Sure, no problem.*" I hopped out of bed.

If I was going to make my ghostly pale face a little more presentable, I had to put on at least a bit of makeup. But first I'd need to get dressed, maybe have some toast, wash my face... Bit by bit, I planned out my morning routine in my head.

One silver lining—I didn't end up wearing my *cheongsam* out of desperation this time. That said, Shimamura *did* seem to like the dress, and if she asked me to, I'd wear it for her anytime. Then again, knowing me, I'd probably do *anything* Shimamura asked.

Man, I'm such a terminal case...or maybe it's normal? No, probably not... Yeah, I've got it pretty bad. My head already ached, and this internal conflict only added to it. The pain made me feel sick to my stomach.

The temperature in the hallway outside my room wasn't much

different. The floor felt like ice.

“Am I in trouble...?”

Given how cold it was, I wasn’t sure Shimamura would choose me over her warm *kotatsu* .

I was only 50 percent joking about the *kotatsu* thing, but when I saw Shimamura walk into the classroom, my worries melted away like snow under spring sun. Only in winter could I truly *feel* her presence fill my chest with warmth. In fact, if we’d been the only two people in the room, I probably would’ve waved and shouted like an excitable puppy. Suddenly, I no longer cared how sleep-deprived I was, all thanks to my sunshine.

Ugh, sunshine. I had figured I’d get over my initial embarrassment after a while, but nope. Still cringey.

Instead of heading straight to her desk, Shimamura walked over to me first. *Already?!* Frozen in fear, I raised my arms slightly as if to brace for impact.

She smiled. “Don’t worry. I made sure to bring it.” With that, she walked away.

Right. Of course she wouldn’t give it to me in public. By no means did that surprise me, but it felt like agony to have to wait—as if I was her dog, and she’d commanded me to *stay* . Okay, maybe it wasn’t quite that bad. But if I was her dog, then she’d hold me in her arms and let me curl up on her lap. Now that I thought about it, being her dog sounded pretty appealing. *No, no, no. No, no, no!* I dug my nails into my forehead, willing myself to come to my senses.

Previously I’d wondered whether I’d possibly turned into a total buffoon in recent months, and this removed all doubt from my mind.

A few minutes into first period, I turned around and made eye contact with Shimamura. Was this what it felt like to have your mom in the classroom with you during Bring Your Parents to School Day back in grade school? I turned and faced forward, scribbling

circles in my notebook with my mechanical pencil.

If our eyes met...that meant Shimamura was looking at me, too.

Of course, given that I sat between her and the chalkboard, one could say that it was only natural she was looking in my direction. That would mean she constantly looked at me from behind. Did she notice me acting weird at all? What if she could secretly read minds, and she knew about all my daydreams during class? I'd probably kill myself. Fortunately, I hadn't noticed her shrinking away from me in terror, so I was pretty sure she couldn't read my mind...like 95 percent sure. But if at any point that changed, and she clapped me on the shoulder and said, "Puberty must be hard for you," I would *literally* die.

These thoughts had me so distracted, I could scarcely focus on class. I glanced around the room. No one else seemed giddy about the holiday; to them, it was apparently just another day. Was I the only person on Earth who was excited for Valentine's Day? Nobody else? Really?

Maybe they were all just waiting until school let out. Hell, so was I. And if I let myself get this worked up at 9 A.M., I wasn't going to last until 3. I needed to relax and outline my goals for the day: go to Nagoya, buy chocolate, and do the gift exchange. Anything else was a bonus.

Maybe I should make a memo, I thought. But when I looked down at my hands...

"Oh."

I had drawn a big circle in the center of my paper, right in the middle of my notes—so dark, I probably wouldn't be able to erase it fully. I looked at the circle, thought about it for a moment, then added petals along the outer rim.

A dark flower bloomed ominously in my hands.

I couldn't remember a thing that happened during my afternoon classes. At some point after lunch, my brain ran out of

memory and shut down. As evidence of that, I had a massive headache. Clearly, this was sleep deprivation taking a toll on my body.

I still had the rest of the day to look forward to, yet my weak-willed heart already yearned for my bed. I pinched my heavy eyelids; they made a pleasant popping sound as I blinked. I told myself it was the sound of my body rejuvenating, then rose to my feet.

I needed to get to Shimamura before anyone else could, so I hurried to her desk. She looked up at me, her textbooks in hand, and slowly smiled. “Are we still on for today?”

“Yeah.” If I’d had a tail, it would’ve wagged like crazy right about now.

“Anywhere in particular you want to go?”

“I was thinking Nagoya—is that okay? Or is it too far?”

“Nagoya?” she repeated quietly, her eyes wide. Was it too much of a leap?

Before I could explain myself, she suddenly burst out laughing. Now I was worried for a different reason altogether; after all, I had no clue what she found so funny about this.

“Incredible,” she said. “Almost like fate, isn’t it?”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. If you hadn’t suggested Nagoya, I was about to. Let’s get going!” She haphazardly stuffed her textbooks into her bag, then jumped up from her chair.

Wait, so...she wanted to go to Nagoya, too? She was acting so unlike herself, it gave me pause.

Then she peered into my eyes. “So, what do you want to do when we get to Nagoya?”

“Buy chocolate... I, uh, haven’t bought any yet, and...I thought maybe it’d be fun to wait until the big day and—”

Shimamura burst out laughing once again right in the middle of my excuse. “Ha ha ha ha! You wanna buy chocolate in Nagoya, huh? Sounds like a good idea!”

I fell silent. What was going on with her? Was she just...in a

really good mood? Something felt different about her, but I couldn't put my finger on what. It was a total mystery. Either way, I was glad to see that she was enthusiastic about hanging out.

Come to think of it, she had yet to give me her gift. I glanced furtively at her; she quickly sensed what was on my mind.

"Did you want your chocolate?"

I nodded three times in quick succession.

She patted her bookbag. "I wanna wait until you buy mine. Otherwise it's not a fair exchange, you know?"

I have to wait even longer? Ugh. Still, she had a point. Apparently, I was Shimamura's dog through and through. I scratched my nose in embarrassment.

"You sure you don't wanna go home and change into your Chinese dress first?" she teased after we arrived at the bike-parking area.

I scowled and contemplated a witty response. *If you want me to wear it so badly, then I don't mind.*

Unfortunately, it came out as, "If...you...want me to..."

I stumbled over practically every word. Even the fried rice at my job could speak better Japanese than me.

"No, no. It'd take too long," Shimamura replied. Evidently, she thought I was being serious. But for the record, no, I wasn't. Obviously.

Before I could humiliate myself further, I hopped onto my bike, and Shimamura followed suit. We hadn't even left campus yet, but oh well—I started pedaling.

Shimamura was probably the only person who would ever ride on the back of my bike for the rest of time.

At least, I secretly hoped so.

When we arrived at the train station, Shimamura looked at the clock and said, "Oh, we can still make the train if we run!" I had no idea how she'd memorized the train schedule that well, but we

started running anyway. We came to a stop and caught our breath as the escalator carried us up to the second floor. Then, once we were at the landing, we took off again.

When Shimamura was the one calling the shots, even exercise could be fun. Kinda.

As we passed through the turnstiles and up to the train platform, a regular (non-express) train was waiting for us on the right-hand side, so we piled onto it. It wasn't as packed as the express train, but it was still decently full. Of all the seats in this particular car, only one was open—an end seat.

“Looks like there's a free seat,” Shimamura commented. Then she laughed. Again. “Why don't you take it, Adachi?”

“I'm good. You can have it.”

“No, I think you should have it. You were sleeping in class.”

This took the wind right out of my sails. *Man, I hate our seating arrangement.*

“Okay, fine...”

Reluctantly, I sat on the very edge of the seat. Shimamura looked at me, and then a beat later she started laughing again. *Why the heck is she so giggly today? Is she just in a good mood? Because... because she's with me? Because we're hanging out? Or...?*

As an alternate explanation occurred to me, I reached up and touched my cheek.

“Hey, Shimamura?”

“Yeah?”

“Does my face look weird, by any chance?” I asked anxiously. Maybe that was what she was laughing at.

At my question, Shimamura's eyes widened in surprise. *Wait, so it doesn't? Was that question stupid?* My gaze flitted restlessly to and fro. Then Shimamura started laughing again. *Seriously, what is with her today?*

Still, her high spirits were like a soothing balm for my nerves.

“On a non-express train, I think it should take us, like, twenty or so minutes to get there,” she said.

“Uh...yeah,” I nodded, although I didn’t actually know for sure.

Holding on to the grab rail, Shimamura peered down at me. “Kind of a boring ride, don’t you think?”



It felt as if she was telling *me* to come up with an entertaining solution, when normally that was her job.

“Okay then, uh...wanna play word chain or something?”

A split-second after I suggested it, I cursed my stupidity. *What am I, five?*

But Shimamura agreed without hesitation. “Sure, that works.”
Seriously?!

Before I could recover, she started us off. “Apple.”

“Uhh...escarole.”

“Wow, that’s a curveball. Okay, something with E... Um... Easter.”

“*Rui-be* .”

“I don’t think most people would know what that is, much less how to spell it!”

We continued our quiet little game of word chain. Meanwhile, the train stopped at each station, and other passengers came and went. There were several opportunities when we could’ve moved to newly vacated seats elsewhere in the train car, but we stayed right where we were, as if we were scared of losing our momentum.

Then it was my turn again, and my letter was L.

A word that started with L...

“Lo...”

Love.

“Lohhvh!”

It was a word I would ordinarily never say aloud, and my tongue stumbled over it.

Shimamura blinked. “What was *that* supposed to be?”

“Louvre...”

“Oh, that. Yeah, I don’t know how to pronounce that, either.”

She bought my lie without an ounce of doubt. *Thank you, France*, I thought as the taste of copper spread in my mouth.

We arrived at Nagoya Station, and I found myself wishing that

it had taken a little longer, since I enjoyed the feeling of being “on a trip” with Shimamura. I wanted to go to all kinds of places with her—not just take these quick little trips—and this dream illuminated my path forward.

Not that I really needed any extra light at the moment. It was blindingly bright down here on the department store’s basement floor—so bright, I was afraid everyone could see my uvula every time I opened my mouth. The place was packed full of people, too. Like high school, only ten times worse. It was kind of surreal, actually.

As we entered the confectionery section, Shimamura pointed at one kiosk seemingly at random. “Whoa, check out that huge line! You could probably buy it there, couldn’t you?”

Sure enough, the kiosk had a very long line, which suggested that the place was popular. Everyone standing in said line was female.

“But if we get in that line, you’ll have to wait a long time,” she added.

Before I could suggest a different kiosk, Shimamura nodded pensively. “Let’s see...” She pulled out her phone like she was checking something. “Eh, we’re good,” she murmured to herself, then looked back at me. “Let’s just think of something to kill time. Something that isn’t word chain this time.”

Normally Shimamura would *never* want to go to all this hassle, so she must’ve been in a ridiculously good mood today. As happy as it made me, I was still really confused...but at the very least, I wasn’t scared.

“Okay, uh...how about...thumb wrestling...?” I suggested, since that would give me an excuse to hold her hand. Once again, it was something a grade-schooler would think of.

Yet she agreed to it nonetheless. “Sure, that works.” *She’s such a big-sister type.* A wave of warmth washed over me at the thought.

We were there, thumb wrestling, for nearly twenty minutes as we waited in line. Then, finally, I succeeded in buying chocolate. That said, it was just a variety pack, with no heart shapes or anything to suggest a Valentine’s theme...because that was the only thing they had left in stock.

With my gift now acquired, we relocated to a corner of the basement floor—the area with the elevators and some available seats. Here, the crowds weren't quite as robust. We sat down facing each other, and Shimamura grinned at me for the umpteenth time. If only she knew how badly that stressed me out every time she did it. After all, it meant I had to stay on guard to keep myself from grinning like an idiot.

“Okay, time for me to come clean.” She pulled out a package from the same kiosk. “I actually bought your chocolate at the exact same place yesterday.”

“Oh, gotcha... Wait, what?!”

Why would she encourage me to buy hers there if it meant we'd end up giving each other the exact same thing? Did she want to try these specific chocolates or something?

“Okay, time to trade,” said Shimamura. “Here you go! Happy Valentine's Day.”

I was still kind of confused, but...a gift was a gift, I guess...so we exchanged the exact same box of chocolates. In a way, it felt like discarding a playing card only to draw that exact same card all over again, but in our case, it had more meaning. *I exchanged chocolates with Shimamura.* This alone was huge. Surely nothing else that happened today could possibly be more important than that.

“Don't just use them for decoration, okay? Promise me you'll eat them before they expire.”

She probably meant this as a joke, of course, but I began to sweat internally. *How did she know?*

“Okay then, uh...I'll eat them right now,” I blurted to deflect my panic.

“Wow, you move quick.” She blinked, mildly surprised.

Just like that, I opened the cling wrap and lifted the lid. Sure enough, inside was a variety assortment, the exact same one I'd bought for her. I grabbed a chocolate at random and popped it into my mouth. As I chewed, I discovered a tart, fruity flavor concealed beneath the milky sweetness. Very satisfying indeed.

“It's good,” I told her, predictably.

She peered up at my face from a low angle. “You really think

so?”

“Uh...yeah...?”

“Hmmm...”

She stared at me ever more curiously, leaning in closer. For some reason, she was really skeptical. Then I noticed how close we were, and I found myself thinking, *You know, maybe it's not so bad having my sincerity questioned.*

Just then, Shimamura pressed her fingers to the corner of my lips. Confused, I stared back at her as she poked at me again and again.

The chocolate had long since melted in my mouth, but its sweetness lingered.

“Okay, I believe you,” she said. Apparently accepting my word as true, she pulled back. Idly, I wondered if there was anything suspicious I could do to weaken my case.

“Why don't you have one, too?” On a whim, I picked up a white chocolate and offered it to her.

“Okay then, I'll try one.”

She reached out to take it—but I dodged her fingers and held it up to her mouth instead. “Um...say ‘ahh’!”

Silence.

Uh, hello? Please say something before this chocolate melts between my fingers. I'm dying.

“Uhh...okay...” With mild reluctance in her voice, she leaned forward and took a bite of the chocolate. She chewed for a moment. “Oh, wow, these *are* good!”

She patted her gift box happily. Evidently, she was looking forward to opening hers later. In that case, I was glad we both got the same thing.

I figured I'd save the rest of the chocolates for another time, so I carefully replaced the lid and packaging. I wanted to take my time and really savor them.

To avoid the excess crowds, we took the stairs back up to the ground floor. When we arrived at the landing, Shimamura pulled out her cell phone once again.

“Almost time now,” she muttered to herself.

“For what?” I asked.

She tucked her phone away. “Just follow me, okay?”

With that, she started walking. I followed curiously alongside her.

She led me outside the train station, and as we arrived at an area with a weird silver art installation, the night wind came to greet us.

“Over there,” she declared, pointing in the direction of the barely-sufficient shrubbery. We walked over and looked up at the LED display affixed there. It looked like a billboard, but nothing was currently displayed, and the whole thing was dark.

I noticed that, for some reason, a whole bunch of opposite-sex couples were gathered around, staring up at the LED display. What were they waiting for? I shot an inquiring look at Shimamura. She smirked at me out of the corner of her eye.

“It starts at six. Oh, there it goes!”

She pointed at the LED display, and I shifted my gaze in kind.

There, on what was once an empty signboard, were dozens of messages—“*I love you, so-and-so* ” and “*hugs & kisses XOXO* ” and a bunch of other cheesy stuff that gave me secondhand embarrassment. The text scrolled horizontally, like a train’s announcement screen. As each new message appeared, I heard giddy shouts of “That one’s mine!” and “I wrote that!” from the crowd. Evidently, these were special Valentine’s Day messages.

Then, amid all the other messages, I saw it.

“*LET’S KEEP ROCKIN’!! Shimamura Hougetsu*”

The name was written in kanji, and at first, I didn’t recognize it...but then it clicked. *Shimamura* .

“Oh!” I did a double take. *Your first name is Hougetsu?*

“Wait, what? Why is your name up there?” Confused, I looked from Shimamura to the screen and back.

She grinned playfully, like a little kid. “This late-night horoscope show was running a special promotion, so I entered.”

Instantly, I knew exactly what she was talking about, because I'd watched the exact same horoscope show myself. *Wait... She watched that show every night?* This took me by surprise.

Then another realization hit me—*this* was the prize the show offered?

"I didn't actually think I'd show up in person to see it, though, so I just wrote something generic." She turned back to the display. I followed suit, but her message had already scrolled offscreen, replaced by someone else's. "Man, look at 'em go!" she laughed.

I was still thinking about Shimamura's message. Was it addressed to me?

"But, like...what does that *mean* ...?" I muttered.

"Huh? It means what it sounds like! Keep rockin'! You need me to demonstrate..." She seemed to be struggling.

That only flustered me worse. "I mean, like, what's the general idea behind it? 'Let's stay friends,' or...?"

Is that it? I wondered. *Is it that simple? What if she rolls her eyes at me for being stupid?*

As I panicked, Shimamura thrust a fist into the air. "Whoooo!" She lowered her arm as quickly as she'd raised it. "How's that?" she asked, tilting her head.

"Oh...o-okay... That works." Likewise, I thrust my fist into the air. "Whoooo."

Whatever she hoped this would be like, she was probably pretty disappointed right about now. Quietly, she watched as my arm slowly sank back down to my side.

"On second thought, maybe it was the perfect message for you."

"Huh?"

"When I wrote it, you were the person on my mind."

She let out a dopey chuckle in an exaggerated display of bashfulness...and that was what pushed me over the edge. The water level in my chest rose, and then a veritable tidal wave of joy swiftly swept me off my feet.

Shimamura wanted to stay friends with me.

I was so consumed with emotion, my tongue numbed. My mind went blank—my vision went blank—until all I could process were bits and pieces. Scenery. Motion.

The next thing I knew, I pressed up against her.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't blink. All sound was drowned out, and I could no longer move or feel my individual body parts, not even my arms wrapped around her. In that moment, I was just one solid mass. Even my sight blurred.

But there was one thing I knew for certain—Shimamura was here in my arms, and I was in hers.



“Adachi...?”

Her voice rippled against my neck, diverting my attention to the ringing in my ears. My eyeballs felt as if they were boiling in my skull. When I could stand it no longer, I clapped Shimamura hard on the back. I felt my flushed ears throbbing hard.

“Ghhcck!”

Coughing violently, Shimamura pulled away, and the feeling returned to my limbs. Then the blood drained from my face—only to come rushing back with a vengeance. *Someone, please, teach my body how to relax.*

“Where did that come fr—” Shimamura began, only to be interrupted by more coughing. I felt both guilty and embarrassed; my tongue faltered and failed to carry out an apology. My windpipe was so tight, it felt as if I was about to start coughing, too.

“Sorry,” I choked, with all the strength I could muster from my throat. My neck cramped up and started to ache. The pain slowly radiated down my spine.

“I just wasn’t expecting it.” Scratching her neck, Shimamura glanced around slightly, as though worried about drawing attention.

Granted, it *was* kinda weird...you know, hugging it out in public...especially since we were both girls. In my head, I understood that, but my body had moved on autopilot.

“Anyway, yeah, um...let’s not do the ‘surprise silent hug’ thing anymore, okay?” she continued, as if gently reprimanding a child.

I nodded vigorously. *Wait... Does that mean it’s cool as long as I say something?*

“So, you’re okay with it?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“I mean, as long as I...you know...ask first, or something?” I gestured with my arms as though I was some kind of pincer claw.

She stared at me for a moment, and then it clicked. “Huh? You want to hug me?”

I wavered...then nodded meekly.

Her eyes darted around awkwardly. “What for?”

Did...did you seriously just ask me that?

At this, I started to panic. It had just been an impulse—there was no clear reasoning behind it. I needed Shimamura...but obviously I couldn’t just say that flat out! Then I saw her shivering in the wind and thought of a plausible answer.

“Because...you’re warm? I guess?”

She looked back at me dubiously, her eyes narrowed. My first instinct was to come up with a different excuse to cover for the first one, but I could already tell that I would end up digging my own grave if I tried. I was now completely cornered. So, with no other option left, I decided to fully commit to my original answer, come hell or high water.

“Let’s warm up!” I suggested.

I could practically feel steam rising from my face and ears. Truth be told, I didn’t really need any extra warmth; I felt like I was trapped in a sauna from the neck up. But that was where Shimamura came in, right?! Yes, I could foist some of this extra heat onto her instead! What a wholesome reason for a hug!

Spurred on by the momentum I’d created, I opened my arms wide. Her lips twisted in an uneven frown. Then, after gazing down at her box of chocolates for a moment, she packed it into her bookbag and gave the whole thing two firm pats. She shook her head slightly, then looked back at me with a strained smile as she gave her usual answer.

“Uhhh...sure, why not.”

Up on the display screen, dozens of messages flew by, seemingly too fast for me to read. That was probably just a hallucination on my part, though.

Meanwhile, Shimamura spread her arms out in a T-pose and waited. “All right, bring it in.”

This presented a problem for me, because I *definitely* wasn’t brave enough to run into her arms. Lowering mine back to my sides, I slowly approached her. But then I saw her start to shiver and felt the sudden urge to hurry, and as a result, I nearly tripped over my own two feet. Fortunately, she was there to catch me.

Whmmph .

“Oof!” Shimamura let out a groan of pain as my forehead collided with her collarbone.

I was likewise knocked dizzy by the impact. Panic made everything fly by in fast-forward, and the ringing in my ears was deafening, but at least I could still feel her collarbone this time.

“You know, when I said ‘let’s keep rockin’,’ this isn’t exactly what I had in mind...”

As I pressed my face against her chest, a small sigh ruffled my hair—a sigh that said, “Oh, you.” She patted me softly on the back. “You call this warm? You’re all skin and bones!”

I relaxed my tense body, resting my weight against her. My forehead still pressed down hard against her collarbone.

“Agh!” she groaned again from somewhere above me.

Did everyone around us think we were weird? Were they laughing at us? I didn’t know—I could only see Shimamura. In that sense, it was heaven on earth. This was everything I had ever dreamed of.

But as I drifted along in a warm, blissful haze, I started to worry that perhaps it was all just a dream. I needed something to prove that it was real. So, I lifted my barely functional arms and wrapped them around her.

Interlude:
Yashiro Comes Calling
Part 5

“I’M HERE for my chocolate.”

“Whoa!”

Out of nowhere, a little blue head of hair springs up at my side. Judging by the color, it’s Yachi. I’m used to bumping into her on the street on my way home from school, but not in my own front yard! Was she waiting for me to get here?

“*Ahem* ! I’m here for my chocolate!”

She swings her arms around, so I start doing it back. Oh no. I did buy some chocolate for her at some point, but then I felt like eating it, so I did. It was so good, too. No regrets.

“Valentine’s Day is over now.”

“But our promise isn’t,” she grins.

Ugh...that was a pretty cool comeback. I never knew that asking for chocolate could be so suave. Hmmmm.

“Just a sec!” I say.

“Okay!”

Yachi stands firmly at attention; I leave her outside and dash into the house. No sign of my sister’s shoes by the door, which means she isn’t home yet. I drop my bag off in our room, take out my wallet, and go back outside.

There, I find Yachi jumping up and down.

“Calm thyself, child,” I say, imitating my sister. Then I try to put my hand on Yachi’s head. I reach, and reach, and reach. *Ow, my sides! I can’t reach!*

Not that Yachi’s super tall or anything—I’m just too short. Even on my tiptoes, I can’t quite reach the top of her head. *Guess I’ll have to jump, too! There! Now I can reach! Wait, but...if I’m jumping too, how am I going to hold her in place?*

We jump and jump until we're both sweaty and tired. Then I say, "Okay, let's go buy chocolate now!"

"Oh, lovely," she responds, but it doesn't quite fit her. Every now and then, there's something off about the way she talks... Maybe she's not from Japan...?

"To the grocery store!"

So, off we go to the grocery store. It's weird—by this point, I'm already used to walking around with her.

"Next year, I'll make sure to have some chocolate ready on the fourteenth like you're supposed to," I say.

"Next year? Hmmm." She falls into thought. "My plan was to go home as soon as I locate my compatriot."

"Compatriot?"

"But where could my dear friend be?"

Don't ask me. I don't even know what a "compatriot" is.

"I followed the coordinates as best I could when I landed, but this planet is just so vast... Walking around on the surface, I can't tell one location from the next. This has significantly complicated my search. Hmmm...what a pickle."

I didn't get most of what Yachi said just now, but I can at least tell that there's a chance she might have to leave as early as tomorrow. She's just so fragile... It feels like she might disappear in a big poof of blue sparkles any second.

"No idea what you're talking about, but it can't hurt to promise for right now, right?" I say. "If it turns out later on that you have to break it, then just give me a heads-up!"

This is what my gut's telling me: a broken promise still isn't quite as sad as a promise that couldn't be made in the first place. So, I figure we may as well make the promise while we can.

Yachi smiles, and sparkles fly—sparkles that perfectly match her hair. "Let's do that, then."

The bright-blue sparkles gently float over to me as the two of us entwine our pinky fingers. She didn't know about Valentine's Day, but she knows about pinky promises? What a weirdo.

And so, Yachi and I make a promise for the future, clear-cut

and carved into stone.

~ Today's Adachi Forecast~

When Shimamura said “let’s *keep* rockin’,” it suggested that from her point of view, our friendship was successfully “rockin’” thus far.

“Heh...heh heh...”

Curled in a ball under the covers, I laughed quietly to myself in the darkness. The feeling of Shimamura’s back was engraved into my arms.

Now my brain could faithfully recreate it anytime I dreamed about her hugging me.

Chapter 5: Sakura (Make a Wish)

DID THIS WORLD have a god? I didn't know who to address these prayers to, but I hoped someone out there was listening.

I hadn't watched that horoscope show in a while, and I thought of going back to it, only to find out it'd gone off the air at the end of March. One fewer signpost to guide me. I turned off the TV and sat cross-legged on my bed.

Since the start of April, I'd spent every single day praying to whatever was out there. Anxiety had settled over my stomach like a haze; sometimes I suddenly found myself sitting on my bed, staring blankly at the clock on the wall. Anytime I let my guard down, I felt myself slump over until my forehead touched the blanket, a groan building at the back of my throat.

Six of one, half a dozen of the other. No matter what my posture was like, the clock hands refused to budge.

It was the night of April 5, and spring break was officially over. Starting tomorrow, I would attend high school as a second-year student...which meant we'd all be reassigned to new classes with new seating arrangements. With a new class assignment came the possibility that Shimamura and I would be separated.

To me, this was a matter of life or death. What I wanted more than anything was to be special to her, and now I was in danger of losing one of few tenable connections to her I had. It was a massive setback.

After all, generally speaking, the friends you spent the most time with were the ones who already shared a class with you. Sure, there were exceptions—like club buddies or whatever—but for the most part, that same-classroom proximity was *crucial*. Not just in the physical sense, but in the emotional sense, too. Distance made bonds weaker...and considering that I couldn't even get along with the people who lived in the same house as me, I clearly needed all the help I could get. That was why this mattered so much.

If we *did* end up in separate classrooms, chances were good Shimamura would never bother to come see me. She wouldn't turn me away if I came to see *her*, but she wouldn't take the initiative; she didn't need me that badly. Not that she really needed *anyone* ... But my point is, I could easily picture our friendship quickly becoming one-sided. Then I'd have even *more* trouble figuring out what to do.

On the day of the previous seating shuffle, my prayers had gone unanswered. I had pleaded dozens of times for them to put me near Shimamura, all for naught. At this point, I was starting to think there was no value in prayer at all... Yet, at the same time, I couldn't think of anything else I could do. I wasn't a god or a teacher—I was only human.

My only option was to offer up my prayers until the day of reckoning rolled around.

My back started to hurt from sitting up straight, so I found myself slumping forward. My forehead touched the blanket, and I closed my eyes. In the darkness, all I felt was the fabric against my skin.

I thought back to the entrance ceremony last year.

At first, I struggled to remember why I'd taken the entrance exam for this particular high school—what my motive was. But then I remembered that I didn't have one to begin with. Based on my test scores, this was the school recommended to me, so I just went with it. After that, I studied to the point that I was reasonably confident I would pass the entrance exam. The next thing I knew, a month after I graduated junior high, I was suddenly a high-school student, just like that.

On the day of the entrance ceremony, as I recalled, the weather was just starting to warm up. A large crowd of new students were packed like sardines at the spot near the front entrance where the class listings were pinned. I hated having to cut through crowds, so instead I stood off to the side and waited until most of the students left.

Mind you, this was a *long* wait. Given the chill of the wind rushing between my bare legs, I had half a mind to say “screw it” and just go home. It wasn’t like there were any classes to attend, nor would my new principal say anything drastically different from my previous principal on the last day of junior high. The thought of listening to another speech had me bored to tears already.

But I wasn’t the only one avoiding the sardine situation. Another girl stood a few steps away, staring into space, keeping her distance from me and the rest of the crowd. Then our eyes met.

Looking back, that girl was Shimamura.

Of course, back then I had absolutely no interest in her, so I quickly averted my gaze. I didn’t want some rando staring at me. Looking back, though, I really wasted a golden opportunity then. If only I’d paid a little more attention to her that day, our friendship could’ve started so much sooner. But no—instead, I sidestepped away from her, and I wasn’t even subtle about it. *Ugh. God.*

But back then, I obviously had no way of knowing how I’d feel about her in the future, so to me she had been no more than a stranger. The longer I waited, the more irritated I’d felt...and this was only the *start* of my day. The thought had been enough to make me contemplate slipping away to the bike-parking area.

Then, as I waited quietly in the classroom, our homeroom teacher arrived and asked us to line up in the hall in alphabetical order by last name. As luck would (unfortunately) have it, I was at the very front of the girls’ line. That never happened to me back in middle school, which was great, because I really wasn’t the “leader” type. Alas, here in high school, there was no Abe-san to hide behind.

As I stood there against my will, our teacher casually went over our instructions. The line leaders needed to walk briskly, address the rest of the line, and do a whole bunch of other annoying stuff that I desperately didn’t want to have to do. I was tired of standing around, too. So, I told the teacher I needed to use the restroom real quick...but instead of going to the restroom, I walked out of the building and didn’t look back.

Once I’d made sure no teachers were nearby giving their students the grand tour, I went to the bike-parking area. There, I unlocked my bike, hopped on, and rode off. No one was there to

stop and hassle me. The perfect crime.

I'd left my bookbag behind in the classroom, but there was no point in going back for it when I would have to bring it to the exact same location tomorrow anyway.

The wind had been against me on my way here, but now it pushed me along for a pleasant, easy ride.

I wasn't used to having people bark orders at me, probably in part because my parents never really interacted with me. They barely even commented on my post-graduation plans. But our frosty relationship was partially my fault, too. And without an existing rapport, it was hard to resent them...or feel anything toward them at all.

This wasn't some teenage rebellion against authority; I just honestly didn't know how to handle it. It was too hard to figure out, so I gave up and ran away instead. Unfortunately, the trepidation lingered. Not even a deep breath was enough to clear the conflicted feelings out of my chest.

On my way home, I'd decided to stop by the park. It wasn't like there was anything fun and exciting waiting for me at home, anyway. I figured I'd kill time until the guilt of skipping school faded.

In my neighborhood, nothing of note ever happened, so the cops didn't even bother patrolling there. I didn't have to worry about any truancy officers breathing down my neck. Thus, I felt comfortable parking my bike at the park entrance. I chose one of the comparatively cleaner benches and sat down. Given the time of day, the park was deserted, and I was alone. Resting my hands on the bench, I stretched my legs out and looked around at the rest of the park and the road next to it.

I knew that parks like these had existed back when I was a kid, but I had no memory of ever playing in one. So, how exactly had I spent my childhood? I'd never had any strong desire to go any specific place or do any specific activity.

In hindsight, I had a feeling that it all dated back to when I was *really* little...probably that time when my parents took me to the zoo. It had this souvenir shop with rows of plush toys based on the zoo animals, and I really wanted one, but I couldn't bring

myself to ask my parents. They were already irritated with me; whatever reaction they hoped to get out of me by showing me these animal exhibits, I'd failed to produce it, and they grew impatient with walking around. We left without any toys...and after that day, I learned to keep my desires to myself.

This sort of thing had happened again and again until I forgot how to want anything at all. That was how I lost interest in the world around me...and now I didn't have a clear sense of self, either.

In my view, people like me were better off averting our eyes. That way we could skate through life without ever having to get our hopes up for something more.

At school the following day, everyone treated me like a delinquent—that is to say, they avoided me and didn't speak to me.

But that had suited me just fine.

When I awoke, I could hear little birds chirping outside my window, and out of the corner of my eye, I saw light streaming through the gap in the curtains. Apparently, I fell asleep at some point... You would think I'd remember nodding off, yet I didn't. To me, it was suddenly eight hours later, with nothing in between. That was perhaps the definition of unhealthy sleep.

Worse, I'd passed out while bent over facedown on my bed, so now my neck and back ached. Did it count as "restful sleep" if I somehow managed to stay in the same ridiculous position the whole night? Probably not.

After eight hours of pressing right up against my blanket, my forehead felt weirdly heavy. I pushed myself upright, and my joints creaked. My mind was all fuzzy. Then my arms gave out, and I collapsed back onto my side.

I had been worried that I'd be up all night with insomnia again, but evidently that was not the case. While this came partly as a relief, I was also terrified of—not to mention completely unprepared for—the day ahead of me. Not that I could've prepared much of a defense by staying up all night, I suppose. The outcome

was already set in stone, and there was nothing I could do to change it.

Although, if I knew for a fact that my prayers would help at all, I guarantee that I would've put those eight hours to far-better use.

“School...”

Suddenly, my hazy, less-than-well-rested vision turned crystal clear. I needed to get up and get going. Apparently, the mere *thought* of school was all it took to wake me. As I hopped off my bed and stood idly in the center of my room, I picked up where my mind had left off last night.

Looking back at the past... Well, the not-too-distant past, but still... “I’m like a whole different person now.”

Reflecting on the way I’d acted a year ago, my past self felt like a stranger. I had gone from “Ugh, don’t look at me” to “PLEASE LOOK AT ME!”

Now that I was conscious of it, I kinda wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

When had I made the switch? What changed me? Thinking back, it was probably Shimamura. Meeting Shimamura, befriending Shimamura. *God, how embarrassing.* At the same time, I was touched. But how did *Shimamura* feel about my switcheroo? Disappointed? Deceived?

All my life, I’d simply gone with the flow and let the cards fall where they may. It was actually pretty easy to drift along without ever hitting a snag, and I liked it more than I thought I did. But now, after stumbling over every challenge I’d come across, I was lumpy all over—like *konpeito* candy.

Was that the right metaphor for my fateful encounter with Shimamura? Candy?

“Hmmm...”

Which was the real me: the old me, or the new me?

Nah, that’s stupid. Obviously, they were both the real me.

The “real me” was the person living and breathing right this very moment. Once upon a time, that person had been the old me.

So, I wasn't going to disavow the changes my past self had made.

After all, I liked the new me quite a bit.

In contrast to the bright, clear weather, my bike pedals felt like lead. Here in April, the sunshine was warm, but the wind was cold and dry. Evidently the spring season had yet to fully defrost.

I hadn't ridden my bike since the end-of-year ceremony the previous month. In fact, now that I thought about it, I hadn't left my house for basically the entire spring break, nor had I hung out with Shimamura. Would I get to see her today? If so...how was I meant to act around her?

As I approached the school building, my anxiety stomachache slowly intensified. The backs of my thighs twitched as if they were electrified. *God, I'm so nervous.* This was a thousand times worse than last year's entrance ceremony.

My hands were so sweaty, they started to slip off the handlebars. Was it really that big a deal? My answer: yes. To me, this was a critical juncture.

"Ugh..."

Unfortunately, that answer didn't solve the churning in my gut. I spent the first leg of the journey terrified to go to school, but by the second leg, I was dying to hurry up and get there already. As it turned out, I wasn't the patient sort.

Right as my palms approached Niagara Falls territory, I finally reached the front gates. As with last year, a teacher was posted nearby to direct new students to the bike-parking area; I passed them and hopped off my bike, as I had all year long. This time, there were a ton more bikes in the rack, and I had a hell of a time finding a spot for myself.

Right as I finished locking my bike up, I suddenly realized I'd parked in the first-year section. Today, however, I was officially a second-year. For a moment I debated going through the hassle of moving my bike to the correct spot, but ultimately, I decided to pretend I hadn't noticed. I had more important things to worry

about.

The wind rustled the branches of the sakura trees, scattering their petals all over the place. Already I saw little green leaves sprouting. As I walked under the trees, however, I started to feel dizzy. Each step made my nausea grow.

As I progressed forward in spite of my failing health, a familiar scene soon appeared before me. A giant crowd of students gathered around the main school building's front entrance, just like last year. Unlike last year, however, I didn't have time to stand around and wait for the students to disperse. I plunged into the crowd like it was a roaring river, prepared to die.

I wasn't confident that I could actually make my way through the crowd, so instead I just used my shoulder as a battering ram, pushing to the center. Now I was one of the sardines, packed in tightly from all sides. Nevertheless, I had a clear view of the classroom assignment list.

First, I looked for my name. The list was in alphabetical order, so I'd probably find myself near the top somewhere. As my eyes flicked back and forth, my heart pounded in time with each movement; I felt it throbbing all the way up to my neck, and my throat was tight.

After my gaze completed a full lap around the list, however, the blood slowly drained from my face. My eyes felt like they were going to fall out of their sockets.

"Nowhere?"

My name wasn't on the list. Nor was Shimamura's. My eyes widened. *What's going on?*

After standing there grappling with this reality for a long moment, I struck upon an explanation: this was the list for *new students*. Of course Shimamura and I wouldn't be on it.

I immediately turned around. I was already full of anxiety just being here, and this error was the final nail in the coffin. At last, the reality of being a second-year sank in.

So, there I was, blushing in the middle of a crowd like a total weirdo.

That said, getting *out* of the crowd proved to be a herculean

task. Crouching slightly, I avoided eye contact as much as possible as I pushed past each person. Even after I was free, my vision's edges were still blurred, and I felt ill.

Nevertheless, I somehow spotted a similar gathering of people on the school building's opposite end. Clearly, *that* was where I was meant to go. My supporting evidence was the fact that I saw Hino and Nagafuji walking side by side away from the crowd. I could hear them chatting happily.

"I'm stuck with you *again* ? How many years in a row does that make this?"

"Ten, I think?"

Evidently, they were assigned to the same class. *Lucky* , I thought, watching them with envy as they disappeared into the school. Now it was time for my next challenge: another dip into the crowd.

Oh, I get it. The second-years are all a lot taller, I mused as I found myself practically buried in comparison. This time, I'd have to fight my way to the front if I wanted to see anything. Plus, people at the front were pushing in the opposite direction to get out of the crowd, which didn't help matters. I swam through the sea of people, receiving the occasional elbow to the ribs for my trouble.

Today I wasn't going with the flow—I was forging ahead of my own volition.

This time, when I scanned the piece of paper pinned to the wall, I successfully located my own name. Just as I expected, it was right near the top and highly conspicuous. Then my eyes drifted down the list. This was the final test that would make or break my whole day.

I felt my vision growing fuzzy with fear, but I snapped myself out of it and forced myself to look. My eyes drifted down...down...down. The crowd's din faded out as my heartbeat grew louder and louder, reverberating in my ears. I could distinctly feel my blood pumping thickly in my veins. My nerves were at an all-time high, and my sight was blurring.

Let it be said that I was far from perfect. I didn't see myself as someone who'd spent her life working hard and thus deserved to get what she wanted. I could go ahead and pray all day, but if those

prayers were ultimately ignored, it was no one's fault but my own. Regardless, my eyes refused to back down—they kept searching. Searching for the truth written right in front of them.

Did this world have a god? Was someone out there listening?

I stood up straight and prayed desperately to find that name.

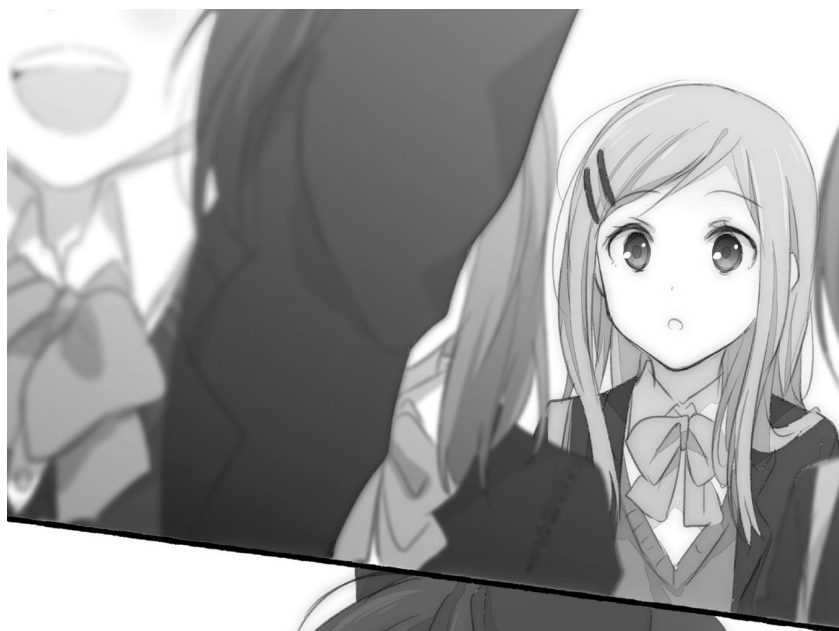
I'm always late on Mondays, aren't I? I thought as I passed through the school gates...though, admittedly, I didn't actually feel guilty about it.

I walked in the direction of the distant chatter, only to catch myself at the last minute before I looked at the first-years' class list by mistake. *Whoops*. I spotted the second-year group and headed over there instead.

"Oh...?"

I stopped short as I came face to face with a peculiar sight.

It was Adachi, leaping into the air with both arms raised in triumph, sakura petals falling all around her.



Afterword

LATE, I KNOW, but...to be clear, this is another romantic comedy. Hell, everything I write is a rom-com!

Jokes aside, I don't really write anything that doesn't involve love in one form or another, you know? Love is what it's all about. All you need is a little courage, and you're set.

These days, I'm thinking that maybe I don't need to write an afterword to begin with. Anyway, hi, Hitoma Iruma here.

This has nothing to do with *Adachi and Shimamura*, but I wrote this essay-like thing in *Dengeki no Kanzume* in April 2014. When they sent me the sample copy, I realized that my piece was the first one. If I'd known I would be first, I would've written a line or two bragging about it, at least! So, here I am, bragging here instead.

That reminds me—I've noticed a lot of my local stores closing down lately. Pork cutlet restaurants, Chinese restaurants, cafés, all places I remember from my childhood... yet, as of 2014, they've shut their doors for good, one after another. I get that all things have to come to an end eventually, but it's painful to feel the passage of time through the act of saying goodbye.

Also, this is completely off-topic, but I really love *Argento Soma*. If you haven't seen it, I encourage you to change that.

I'd like to give thanks and whatnot to my mother, who's always doing a Funassyi impression, and my father, who doesn't have a Funassyi impression.

I'm also curious about that person who gives me books from time to time—my “editor,” whatever that is. Are they doing well? I wouldn't know.

Lastly, thank you for buying my book. Will there be another one, you ask? Uhhhh...no idea!

—Hitoma Iruma



Thank you for reading!

Get the latest news about your favorite Seven Seas books and brand-new licenses delivered to your inbox every week:

[Sign up for our newsletter!](#)

Or visit us online:

gomanga.com/newsletter